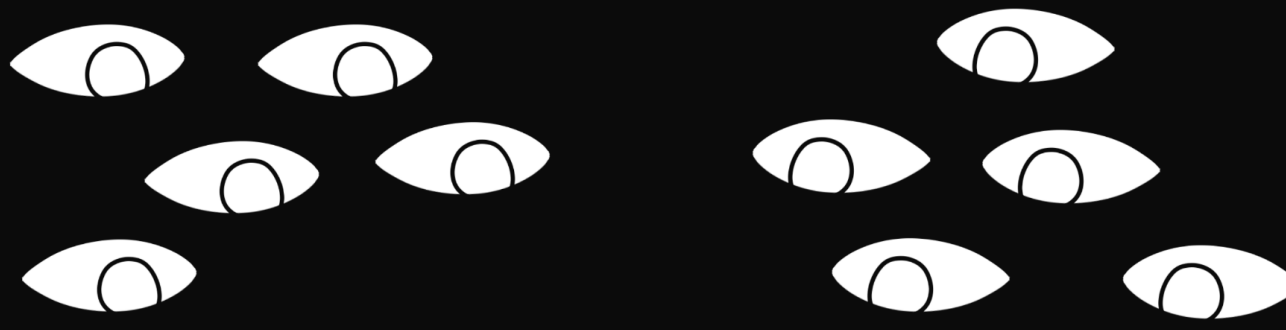
Extraordinary



DOTING DARKNESS

Jasmine

Extraordinary

Doting Darkness

By Jasmine

Book 2 out of 8

Chapters

Prologue 1
Chapter 1 (The First Assembly) 5
Chapter 2 (Charles Turner) 18
Chapter 3 (Just Friends) 36
Chapter 4 (Snuck In).....51
Chapter 5 (The Dark Arts) 64
Chapter 6 (Search for a Classmate) 80
Chapter 7 (Deal's A Deal).....94
Chapter 8 (Friends?) 104
Chapter 9 (Soulsider) 122
Chapter 10 (The Writing in Blood) 141
Chapter 11 (Politics Confidential).....157
Chapter 12 (The Class Founder) 173
Chapter 13 (Untold Tale) 181
Chapter 14 (Vice) 195
Chapter 15 (Torn Pages) 211
Chapter 16 (Unlikely Friends).....221
Chapter 17 (Fatherly Advice).....231
Chapter 18 (Stemlung) 245
Chapter 19 (Stuck on You) 256
Chapter 20 (Aster's Secret) 274
Chapter 21 (The Missing Ghoul).....281
Chapter 22 (Renard's Return) 293
Chapter 23 (The Escape of Darkness) 305
Chapter 24 (The Aftermath).....323

Prologue

One mighty night, the moon was high, watching over all the citizens of a peculiar metropolitan, New York City, specifically its Manhattan county. A city known for its exquisite skyline, famous landmarks and bustling streets. It was no wonder why it was called "the city that never sleeps."

But beneath the diamond buildings, skyscrapers, billboards that were filled to the brim with every consumer's favorite media, there was a dark secret lying beneath everyone's noses, from the public to even the government, though it's a problem even plaguing the lowest class countries—Corruption. Not a greedy kind of corruption, rather a disease spread, not by an infected person, but by the scummiest demon to ever exist in any dimension.

While every country is hit with such a disease, New York City was the worst, yet they try their best to hide that fact, and it is successful. People still visit the grand land to this day.

One of the countless landmarks celebrated is the great Central Park. As the name would suggest, it is a humungous park placed straight in the heart of Manhattan. Dressed in the jade of nature, it's a hotspot for the most peaceful of walks and a hub for many friendly hangouts. At night, nothing would change. The same number of people would be present and enjoying the time of their lives, ignoring the possibility of the end of the world looming over their heads.

That night, there was an innocent teenager, patiently lounging on a neat wooden bench in the middle of the park's road where everyone having their cold night walk would pass him. His parents were some of these

people, eager to have their bodies flatten out and live longer than even their son.

The boy may have waved at his family once they reach him, his attention wasn't really paid to them. Instead, he set his eyes on someone. Someone he has been looking forward to meeting and planning to since moonrise.

His feet tapped to the catchy melody of the song he has been playing on his headphones, connected by a wire between it and his phone sleeping in his pocket. Even his jet-black bristle hair, poorly knitted muted-colored scarf and grayish-purple jacket bobbed to the beat, twitching along with his motion. The dead of the night didn't stop him from continuing his good mood that carried over from the rest of the day.

Finally, after some waiting, his friend had arrived. He was a lofty, gangly Japanese boy. Strands of raven hair covered half of his right eye, which was as green as the trees surrounding him. Worn on him was a cotton yet tight, white turtleneck sweater with a light gray pattern running across it, contrasting the sharp look of his head and back. To round it off, his slate jeans were almost shredded. He might as well have blended in with the night.

"Hello, Renard," the boy greeted. Something was clearly off about him, but nothing could be pinpointed.

Renard cackled. "Hello, Tadashi!" His tone changed into one of longing. "It's really been a while, hasn't it?"

Tadashi nodded eagerly. "That's true. I'm happy you got my letters for once."

"Sorry, just busy with… Gosh, everything," Renard flushed his cheeks in embarrassment.

"No need to make excuses, my friend. I understand. I may even be worse off since my parents won't stop getting a hold of me."

“Well, how’s it been? Being away from Open Book?” Renard asked his good friend.

Tadashi stood in thought, searching if anyone has been watching, possibly camouflaging into the bushes. “It’s been good… Nothing better in terms of corruption though but anything will do for everyone at this point. I have been missing you, though.”

“I miss you too. Maximillian is great and all, but man does he always get diverted when we talk!” Renard chortled again.

As the conversation went on, Tadashi started to get physically closer and closer before ending up sitting on the same brown bench as his old friend, happily sharing everything about what happened during lost time. Renard hasn’t been this animated since he had an ice cream tub earlier that day.

“So, wait, who is this new principal?” Tadashi asked.

Renard swallowed, almost choking. “Gregory Dunkel. Some think that he’s related to one of the founders of the school.”

“Yes, yes, Zosma Dunkel. They do look eerily similar,” his friend added. “I don’t believe it though,” Renard continued with a confession. He didn’t know if he spouted something popular or the opposite, but he didn’t care if he was even met with any animosity. Sticking to his guns has always been his motto for life. Meanwhile, he could subtly spot someone familiar walking in the darkened grass—a Class 1 student. No need to be mindful, though. It’s just notable.

“I get it. It’s kind of crazy,” accepted Tadashi. Suddenly, he began to jitter, stuttering in his next sentence, then not even being able to finish it. It’s like he was being tazed by a ghost in the distance.

“Tadashi?” Renard urged. “Are you ok?”

No words were said. It seemed as though he was being rebooted… But how? That made Renard’s teeth grind. He was hoping at that very

second that his parents would pass, but sadly that wasn't even close to happening. The next best resort was shaking his friend frantically, or maybe something even more physical. "Tadashi, c'mon mate!"

Luckily, he woke up in time. "Sorry," he deeply apologized, his eyes widened, shining the purity of the lanterns towering over them behind the bench.

But Renard didn't say anything… After Tadashi's palms contacted his, he was inflicted with the same spell as his good friend sitting beside him. Frozen. Turned into a statue. Feeling nothing whatsoever, just the deep pleasure of experiencing pain, the storm brewing in his soul, the tearing of his flesh. No shallow wounds were spared, but none of them were visible. And during that whole tense moment, he had nothing to say. Pure isolation in his throbbing emotions mocked him.

"Renard?" Tadashi asked. The tables have turned.

"Right, excuse me. I was daydreaming…" Renard sighed once he woke up. A smile opened up again. "Oh, sorry, it's night!" A hollow laughter followed. Even his lanky friend could recognize it. A gouging frown was worn before he grounded himself back to the supposed warm moment.

"Hey, how about we visit that playground? You know, the one we used to visit all the time after school as children?" Tadashi offered.

"Yes!" Renard cheered. "Just real quick, I need to ask my mom and dad."

Tadashi waited, then nodded, his eyes screaming at his old friend to not do it, else he will get exposed for… Something. Yet, the oblivious boy didn't even hear it, carrying on to the wilderness of the park, finding the light that were his parents trotting along, unaware of what was going on inside their son's head.

Chapter 1

The First Assembly

The following morning, it was finally a school day. It turns out that, after the incident of Terrance's break-in, a kidnapping, in the campus, the school had to shut down for the week, so the only school day so far was literally only the first day alone, which a lot has happened. This information was only known to students the night following the end of the first day, so it's not like anyone would've even guessed they couldn't see each other until a week and a day later, nor would they even talk about it beforehand in school. While it was a possibility, it was just that—a possibility, not really set in stone.

So, after the long free week, what felt like an extended summer, they finally returned on Tuesday and (hopefully) have their lives back to normalcy for once. It was true that education can be dreadful, but at the same time, without a school day, life would feel odd for the students, even if they sought pleasure in the week off.

And what's better to kick off the actual start of the school year than a massive assembly among the many groups of children glued together in a sweaty hall.

Among the many lines of students in the auditorium, there was a peculiar class, Class 2 of the tenth grade. They were sandwiched between Class 1 and 3 of their same year, and behind them was Class 2 of the eleventh grade and in front was Class 4 of the ninth grade. There were really only nine until twelfth graders present since the hall was too small to fit more than those groups.

The walls were a lot dirtier than the rest of the school, which is strange considering the fact that any officials from outside the school who come to visit tend to end up there to view its magnificence. It was a sandy-gray color, mixed with particles of mud brown. Tiled floors were glazed at the bottom of everyone's feet.

One of the dozens of students in attendance at the assembly was Bruno of Class 2. Unlike his classmates, he was an average boy. Donning a blue and black striped shirt, grayish-blue shorts that could be mistaken for trimmed jeans, he proudly wore his ocean baseball cap backwards, complete with an apple red backpack. He stood still, arms to the side, while his peers were either chatting their lives away or tapping their shoes to a mysterious beat. A mask of a bored smile could be seen on him.

Despite being a statue, he did manage to poke his eyes around the environment, including the students he really only got to know for one day from the other classes. Somehow, he managed to already meet many and only didn't recognize some from his batch. However, when he turned his back to see the seniors, he was shaken. Tremoring from the fear of their power, even if he was two years apart from the to-be graduates. In a secret admission, he turned his head back to view what's forward.

Ahead of the youngest grade standing, there was the stage. It had velvet curtains (currently tied to its side), more surrounding the backdrop, clearly indicating that there was a backstage. The dark wooden base kept singing as anyone standing there would take any step, and there was one man doing the walking—Gregory Dunkel, the principal of the school.

Because Bruno never got to see Dunkel on the first day of school, this was the first time he got to see his principal, and he was as daunting as he had expected. Imposing, foreboding, painted in jet black except for his ghostly pale skin and ruby pupils, covering his coal irises. A part of his shabby asphalt hair curtained his right eye. He wore a silver shirt, slate

pants and a rich black cape wrapped behind him. His gaze, despite one being tucked under his rogue hair, was deeply piercing to the children, like a snake to prey. While it was intimidating, it did command respect.

Pushing himself to the edge of the high stage, behind the equally tall podium, he started to speak on the microphone reaching his mouth.

"Good morning, students and teachers," he greeted.

No response, as he expected. Everyone was frozen by his presence, even the technicians who helped set up the mikes.

"Sincere apologies for not conducting this assembly in the beginning of the year. I was busy with certain work, and as you might have known, I was not even present when there was an incident involving two of our teachers that caused the school to close. Sincere apologies once again to those affected, and I apologize for not helping." His statements didn't sound so genuine though.

"Oh, and please give a round of applause to Bruno, Alex, Aster, Blossom and all the Class 2 students who helped solve the case. May my thanks also extend to your teacher, Mrs. Garcia Berry."

At once, everyone put their hands together, creating a symphony of the vibrations of their palms. It was music surrounding the single Class 2 line. Bruno searched around for Aster and Blossom, the two named kids who helped him on his quest to find the teachers—and there they were as he had expected: In their respective class lines, 3 and 4. Worn on them were the biggest smiles.

The boy could've laughed along if they hadn't bullied and rejected him before. Really, he only worked with them because they just so happened to be caught in the kidnapping crossfire.

After the spectacular moment, Bruno raised his head high to see his monstrous principal again, not looking like he was experiencing the same

emotions as anyone else. If anything, he didn't even have a face. Looming shadows covered his eyes before he started speaking again.

"If you're wondering what my work is: I was trying to find a brand new vice principal. Sadly, our last one, Stuart Ringel, has unfortunately died in such a cruel manner that I can't even describe it here," Dunkel went on, now a pang in his tone cracked through. He choked visibly that he seemed genuinely shocked by that news himself.

Then Bruno heard wild murmurs from the surrounding students. What piqued his interest the most was that there even was a vice principal. The school was already different than others, implementing sparring and cooking as whole lessons, subjects that don't even exist in any other school in America. Why not just leave out a second-in-command? He supposed the management variation can't be that farfetched.

"But now I'm proud to declare our newest vice principal: James Lam! Unfortunately, he isn't here. Just a few moments ago, he told me he has to deal with family matters right now. Be patient. He should be coming anytime this week! Once he does arrive, treat him with the utmost respect and allow him to adapt to our school environment," Dunkel said. Everyone bobbed their heads in unison and roared, "Okay!"

Dunkel had a wide smirk. "Anyways, I am glad I can finally orchestrate this first assembly as we start the 2011-2012 school year!" he gleamed.

Everyone shared his energy, all cheering together, though not as lively as they were when clapping for the students.

"This year will be full of surprises and activities waiting for you, from the youngest starting out (looking down on the ninth graders) to the seniors just smelling their graduation (staring high at the twelfth graders, proudly). Memories to be made, maybe even friends to be had for the newcomers. And most of all: I will get to know all of you better!"

The last sentence might've made Dunkel look alluring, but really, it just tainted Bruno's opinions on him even further. It almost sounded like a threat, like he was asking to get closer to his pupils to gain something out of them. What is it, nobody really knows. Something just seems off from the air alone.

Dunkel tapped his fingers on the podium, thinking of what else to say. He didn't plan his speech thoroughly, did he? "Right. Let's discuss the school rules, as per tradition." His voice grew more tired.

Shifting his head back, a staff member pulled a rolling whiteboard that they saved behind him. Creaks cried on the wooden floor before Dunkel stopped it with a push against the pull. Lifting a red marker, he wrote on the board large and clear: "SCHOOL RULES" in full bold letters.

"Now, I expect you to know them," he said after tossing the marker into the shelf at the bottom of the board itself along with the rest of its brethren. The noise was so snappy, it woke some of the students from their bored slumber. "Right?" Dunkel sounded more annoyed than he was, which made the moment more apprehensive. A student perked up from the Class 3 line after the principal struck him a thunderous glare. "Ella!" he bawled. "Can *you* tell them?"

Ella exchanged worrisome looks at her friends, who were hiding behind her in line. All shivering, twitching. They were all eyewitnesses of the teachers' kidnapping on the first day of school and they played a part in finding them. Dunkel would've known… And they had to be in trouble since they were out of class when they were being interrogated by Bruno. Although they seemed to be afraid of the crowd watching their words, there were also questions if they feared what their principal could do. Violent things. The newcomer could tell that from a distance away in their eyes. Finally, Ella shook back up at Dunkel.

“Respect your teachers,” she stated, catching her breath.

Dunkel smirked. “Poppy, Mina.”

“Don’t… get out of class without the teacher’s permission… Or as a group,” Mina added with her friend, though her tone suggested that she was confessing in front of everyone.

“Raise your hand when you want to speak,” finally Poppy said.

As they were speaking, Dunkel wrote those rules, word by word. His back only shown to them. Without even turning, he ordered, “Come on, talk!”

Those words of encouragement appeared to have lit up the auditorium because everyone began to animate and spoke of the rules, the rules everyone knows about.

“Don’t eat in the classroom!”

“Don’t be a bully, be a friend!”

“Ask your teacher for any help!”

“Keep your class clean!”

And so on and so forth until Dunkel filled up the entire whiteboard with his marker. He backed away, then proudly admired it, not even caring that he’s covering the middle of his text from the pupils beneath him. Certainly, he was commending a piece of art until he finally spun to find his lost subjects. “Look at that,” he pointed out. “It’s all because you’ve got impeccable memory. Never expected less from my children!”

“Now, these rules can help make the school a safe environment for students and teachers alike. Where everyone can be treated equally and be respected. That’s what the name of the school means! Open Book School!”

The cheery notation of the boss didn’t soothe Bruno at all. He was fully in fight or flight mode, and he didn’t really have a reason why. Dunkel, at this point, wasn’t so harmful; Other than making some

suspicious statements. The rest of the crowd grew more mellow towards him. It's really only been a couple of minutes, yet speaking up has really made them open up… Scary how he managed to gain their favors so quickly.

Dunkel slapped the marker on the base of the whiteboard, huddling with the rest of the pens, then he stood coolly, his arms wrapped on his back. The faint tap of his shoes echoed through the spacious halls. "Well, I hope all of you follow these rules to your grave… That grave being your graduation here." That could've been interpreted as a threat, but of course, he's just referring to how they won't be in the school anymore… Right?

The morbid gazes from everyone tempted a smile from the principal, but he drew out a smirk instead. "Don't worry, I'm just saying that it's temporary. Just follow the rules and you'll be out of my sight. If you treat me well, then I'll treat *you* well. I'll not annoy you at all. That's my philosophy," he stated, raising his hands up like he has nothing to show. "What else do I have to say?" The question was asked to himself.

Soon enough, a redhead teacher stepped on stage. Not to announce, but to ask him only in his ear. "We have to announce the newcomers." Dunkel lit up, which shook the teacher as he was once frozen. "Of course! Thanks for reminding me, Ms. Herring." The teacher ran back to her students, avoiding the intimidating boss she has.

Dunkel sight was set throughout the auditorium, searching for the wide-eyed new kids. Instantly, it was steady on Bruno, the most notable one because of what he did on the first day. "Yes, you remarkable child," he called out. "Bruno Lively Ray."

Suddenly, everyone gaped at the boy in blue. He was an alien in the middle of a bustling metropolis that is a K-12 school—What a nightmarish situation to be in! Now Bruno could only spot the deep fixed looks from

his surroundings. He was trapped in a whirlpool of anxiety, the peers being the azure covering him. Darkness shrouded him in a loss of clarity. The heart was racing like a sports car.

"H-H-Hello…" he stammered. Reality shifted back to normal as he tried to ignore everyone.

"Did you know he's a newcomer? Give him a warm welcome, please!"

But a split second after Dunkel suggested that, Bruno snapped. "You don't have to!" His mouth soon was shielded by his hands.

"I understand," Dunkel subtly hissed, but pretended to be nice.

Other transferred students were called, all proudly wearing that badge. It appears that Bruno was the only one ashamed of it. Perhaps because he was the only one not from the ninth grade, embarrassingly from the following year. He could've stayed at his middle school, yet he physically can't without being abused by his classmates there. That's why he even moved to another school—another city—with his family, at least part of the reason.

As everyone else was named, Bruno didn't even get to listen. His mind was clouded with the opinions, every judging word that other people might be thinking about him. *What a strange kid. Why did he join just now? He's so pathetic in his old school, he had to leave like this! Why do we need such a worthless kid in our school?* Some along those lines, of course. It lingered so much, it might as well have hung over him through the rest of the day. Luckily, it didn't, just staying for the short span of time between the introduction of the rookies of the school and some of the principal's comments. The claps that once praised him turned into symbols of their showing their backs to Bruno. His head swirled around others in his year, all coldly giving it up for all the kids being announced. Nobody made eye contact.

Strangely enough, he noticed something missing in his class's line specifically… *Something* isn't missing; however, it's *someone*. He swore it was Renard. But really? *Renard*? He had to be mistaken. Renard was a shapeshifter of some sort, or a magician. According to his classmates, the boy had magic. He had to have teleported away or made a disguise. And he couldn't have been absent either since Bruno even spoke to him earlier during his trip from his bus to class. Unless he didn't magically get away… Still, Bruno shrugged it off as him being in a drunken haze of worry.

Finally, Dunkel was done. He shoved the whiteboard behind the curtain, which woke Bruno up with all the noise. The principal's once joyous expression turned serious once he spoke.

"Now, all of you, reach your class in time. Class 121, move along, then you, 122, follow them." The order was heed as the near adults marched out of the auditorium, though not without pointless blabbering about some school gossip that has apparently already been sprouted, no doubt about the whole Terrance situation.

Next was Grade 11, then Grade 10, Bruno's year. As the members of the second class, they were all swiftly guided back to their room with Garcia. And as they were trotting their way through, Bruno kept trying to find Renard with his own eyes, but too many students were in front. He swiveled back. No luck either, only seeing Alex's cold gaze. With only the hope of his friend and leader of the class, Alex's wisdom, he has a chance of figuring out something.

"Psst, do you know where's Renard?" Bruno whispered, somehow not breaking his neck.

“Renard? No. Last time I saw him was when we were walking to the auditorium, front of Violet in line,” Alex gave as his reply. “Why? He’s not here?”

“Not really…” Bruno said as he shifted his body to the forward direction, then bending to see if Violet was following Renard. Nobody was there except for Sheldon ahead of her. Their classmates strangely didn’t seem to mind Renard’s absence.

“Maybe he just went to the toilet urgently,” suggested Alex.

Bruno mumbled. “*Maybe*.” Not even looking at Alex at all, just focusing on the beats of his shoes.

The memories of the assembly jogged through his mind after. The way his mind felt about it was like it was a twenty-year-old tale, but it was only five minutes old. How Dunkel was so vivacious, how he preached about how the school was safe when Bruno’s bullies and a couple of teachers were, put it simply, victims of kidnapping. Questions about staying rained upon him. Why *should* he stay? It’s likely that an event would change his mind though, knowing himself.

Finally, they reach the classroom. It’s as Bruno remembered: spacious, full of tables and lots of motivational posters. Once they arrived, everyone dispersed to their seats and began to discuss Dunkel. Gossip swept through like a tide.

And the moment Bruno got to his chair, Alex swiftly followed, pushed his chair and gagged up before starting to open his mouth. “I don’t see Renard here.”

“Me neither,” Bruno sighed while he was carefully placing his backpack below his table.

Then Bruno and Alex could hear their neighbors, Nadia and Isabella (or Bella), muttering like the other students around them. Because of the

higher volume, of course, more could be heard… Maybe they could piece together what they're saying for once in spite of all the babbling in the background.

Bella breathed. "Dunkel's really not going to get better this year, huh?"

"What made you think of that?" Nadia asked, curiously.

Her friend's head twisted left to right before landing to her eyes. "He just… Still sounds *suspicious*, you know?"

"Everyone says that… They have been since I've joined this school in…" She choked for a second. "*Seventh grade*."

Bruno's hair bristled. Seventh grade… That's also when he had to endure his middle school folks, and they were far from the most welcoming kids. He was glad to have left them even if this new academy is a bit more tense.

"Well, I guess you're not wrong. Dunkel joined the year before. But from the minute that he stepped in… Yeah, there has always been a strange sinking feeling in everyone's guts. In my opinion, it's a red flag." Bella seemed a little hesitant to really admit this at first. As if she believed that she was being watched by her principal all the time, so she was forced to be subservient to him.

Nadia scoffed. "I think it's just the way he is. Not all adults will be Mr. or Ms. Sweetheart!" she told off.

Yet, her friend still appeared to be disturbed. Tapping her fingers on the table, increasing it in speed, and her eyes prowled around. "I suppose you're right."

"Not saying we shouldn't question him, of course. Even *I* can't deny that he's a bit…" Nadia pulled her words back. Her mouth tingling in an odd matter. It's like a power above tempted her to say nothing. "Let's

just be nice a bit. Plus, the school just recovered from a huge fiasco! He must be stressed."

"Yeah," Bella smiled in agreement.

Suddenly, they turned their heads ahead for a quick second. That's when they notice Bruno and Alex listening in, their necks snapped to the back of their chairs, and that's when they trembled in shock. Gulps came passe their esophagus. The girls squeaked before dipping under their tabletops. Finally, the boys turned to their front and exchanged solid glances.

"Is it true… What they said about Dunkel?" Bruno nervously asked. His leader backed away, then scoffed. "Do you think they're lying? To me, everything they said *is* true."

That didn't clear up Bruno's question further, yet he pretended to ignore the vagueness. "Dunkel has always been strange… Like he's from another world. I never admit this to anyone, of course. I'm their leader. If I admit this, then they'll be afraid."

"Yeah. I'm glad I'm far from alone in this… He's off to me as well, even more so than my old Principal Rob! And he locks children in his office for a living!" confessed Bruno. That raised an eyebrow in his seat partner, who soon tapped his nails into a rhythm. "Don't all principals do that?" The blue boy flung closer to his ear, whispering, "You don't know what he does there…"

That certainly caused Alex's heart to drop, though it can't possibly be worse than what Dunkel could do, at least for him. It was an understandable thought. Since day one, Bruno had always imagined the principal as some vicious, vile man who gets high on power trips. The fact that Alex can't even describe his punishments says it all.

Soon, his mind returned to Renard like a boomerang as his eyes scanned through the room. Among the many students settling down, bending backs to talk, heightening their decibels, the kid still wasn't there. Nobody wore his smoky scarf, navy blue jacket, none of that. But his large trolley was there, hiding under his table. How peculiar.

After some more examination, he got to pluck up the courage to speak across the classroom, to Maximillian, Renard's seat partner. "Max!" he called out.

That caught the student's attention, making his neck stiffly turn to his classmate a pair above him to his left. Almost robotically. It made sense as Max was a robot, created for purposes the peer who's calling him doesn't know, or really even himself. "Yes?"

Bruno had to twist his head so back, his throat could've snapped in half. "Uh, do you know where's Renard? I know he can't be absent. His bag is clearly there," he asked, proceeding to point to the trolley underneath the table. As Max took his time to search for it with his lazer eyes, his body made a metal snap. Soon, his eyes returned to his classmate's. "I don't know, to be honest," he replied, lost.

For a split second, Bruno could see a bit of bitterness in Max's eyes, not only for his partner, but for seemingly something else too… He did hear that Max's father, or creator, was caught murdering five innocent college kids… Could his classmate feel disgusted or grief about that?

Bruno blinked for a bit, then faced forward, thinking deeply about Renard… Where could he be? And most of all, why isn't anyone looking for him? Unless he really did need an urgent trip to the toilet and nobody knew of that. They were all half-asleep after all.

Chapter 2

Charles Turner

Dashing into the chaotic room was their homeroom teacher, Mrs. Garcia Berry. No doubt her lateness was caused by her chatting with her fellow teacher friends, ones she made upon joining the school four years ago. Her wallowing expression says the most about her state, yet when she landed on her enlarged seat, her body and face relaxed. As if she comfortably ended up in bed after a long, harrowing day.

Then her gaze was fixed on her students. Although they weren't really reciprocating, Bruno was, and the eye contact made him shudder. Any glare from a teacher could do such a trick. Every time that happens to him, he felt like he was silently being demanded to heed their every word. Even worse was that Garcia was his English teacher. Bruno's respect for them has been raised further than other subject teachers because the subject is his favorite. A factor in his fondness for it were his ambitions. Vague to his peers, but he knew what he wanted.

Ducking his head down, Bruno blankly stared at his table with the fake wood pattern. Nothing was there. Why did he pretend there was anything to see?

He pads his time by pulling out some books out of his backpack, then realizing he forgot to get to his locker. A question floated in his head, one repeated by Alex the first and only day in this school so far: "Why did I use a locker when I've got a huge backpack?" Snickers poured out of his sick mouth before shuffling his hands to find a peculiar book buried deep beneath the piles of measly extra ones in case of noting down anything.

It was a skinny book, yet so wide at the same time, almost as much as his hands. The book in question belonged to…

"History…? Why is my history book here?"

"How convenient," Alex scoffed, his voice lurking behind Bruno's ears. They weren't even looking at each other at all, just staying still while moving their lips. "Our next lesson is history with the great Charles Turner."

The title of "great" certainly edged Bruno's curiosity. "Charles Turner," he retorted to himself. "Can't wait to meet him." He couldn't even decide if he should sound sarcastic or ecstatic.

With the lift of his head, almost banging on the tabletop from how low he had to go down for his top-heavy bag, he hoisted all the equally heavy books to the surface. As he dropped it, the table shook erratically as though it experienced an earthquake. The tiny notebooks were the cherries on top.

"Woah, why didn't you keep these in your locker?" Alex winced, finally turning his head to view what was going on to his right.

Bruno had a good chuckle. "Honestly, I think even the locker can't handle this." Upon making that joke, he gave a quick glance at Garcia, trying not to get caught for all the noise he produced. After, he returns to the topic with peace of mind. "You think I can excuse myself?"

But Alex didn't seem to want to answer it, his mind occupied with the ridiculous texts ahead of him. "Where were all these books on the first day?"

Another good question for Bruno to answer, obviously an opinion told by the shaky smile on him. "I knew we wouldn't study much, so I didn't take them. I mean, you still saw me bring some of them anyways." His friend gripped to reality soon enough. "Well, just tell Garcia *now*," he urged, almost turning disgusted at the sight. Looks like even he didn't care

about the books at all seeing as he made it out like it's the first time he has seen them.

"Alright, alright," mumbled Bruno, though he tried to hold some laughter.

As he had waited for this moment, with the approval of his class leader, he lifted his head up to Garcia, who was busy with some paperwork, constantly being seen curling her hair and trying to hold back the temptation of grinding her teeth. Her coffee cup close to falling off with every cackle of her keyboard.

"Mrs. Berry?" Bruno called.

Instantly, she shifted her body to him, ignoring her laptop. "Yes?"

"May I take these books to my locker? I won't take long," he asked calmly.

She stared at the tower of books, recoiling nearly the same way as Alex. "Of course, dear." A cough came. "Do you need help?"

Bruno exchanged a snapping look at his stash before directing it back to his class teacher. "Not really. I've dealt with worse, trust me," he insisted smugly.

With his misplaced confidence, he took the locker key from a pocket of his backpack, digging it into his own pocket in his bluish gray shorts. He carried the first top half of the line. Down from biology to math, his least favorites, he used up all his strength and might to drag himself out of class with them. What a metaphorical moment it was, since Bruno would describe his performance, skills and knowledge about the topics those books embody. But his mind wasn't on that, rather how to continue on carrying the building leaning from his palm to his shoulder after he marched the class door open.

Even with limited time and memory of the school, he still managed to recall where the locker room was. Not that far from Class 2, only a slight left turn. And he *did* follow his inner map of the campus. In between his class and Class 3, to the front, that's where the room is.

As soon as Bruno reached it, which was a miracle, he immediately let go of his arms, plummeting the books down to a puddle on a seat. And it was a puddle since some went rogue enough to get under said seat. "Oops," he muttered to himself. Recollecting the leftover textbooks and laying it across the widened bench, he stared at it as if they were children he needed to discipline. "Ok…" he breathed.

After he snatched the key from his pocket, Bruno thrusted it into his locker, labeled 21, twisting it open. Inside were the already present load of books on the bottom. Hanging on top were also his signature blue baseball caps. Apparently, he had to store more in case of an emergency.

Then the painful memory crashed through him like a tidal wave. It was of Aster and Blossom, in their bullying ways, smashing Bruno into the door he just opened. Visuals of the scene scorched him, remembering the way he was shoved inside and locked in once the Class 4 leader, Michael, came in. The thin strips of light passing through it, the race of his heart. The words his bullies had said. Then he began to ponder why did he even have the genius idea of teaming up with them. Survival, he supposed.

The moment almost made him drop the books he was supposed to be transporting. Luckily, he grappled them back and just left the books he didn't need before lunch. Only four… But those four books translated to eight. One notebook and one textbook each—hefty ones at that. Why does music require a lot of words to write?

Finally, he left off all his books, stuffing it all in his skinny storage. After shoving it all in, he ensured it all stayed by using the force of his

pushing back. He frantically pulled out his key to lock it. Quite difficult to do while having books raring to leave on his back.

Huffing from the effort needed to manage his texts, he quietly shuffled his returned ones back into his bag, sliding it while trying to not make contact with anything else inside. During that whole time, his eyes crossed, searching if anyone was secretly waiting to ambush him. Those two people he anticipated being Aster and Blossom, recreating that very moment that caused him some inner anguish a few minutes ago.

Once he finished his duty, he set off to find his classroom. Skipping his way there, he spotted the many sights he missed before due to the stress of carrying such a top-weight bag. It still wasn't much lighter, but he felt he could rest easy knowing that he didn't need to trouble himself further until lunch many hours later.

Strangely, on the way back, he found a lost man roaming around. The person in question was average-sized, had striking earth hair that was fluffy, a peculiar tan buttoned shirt with a darker tone of the same color wrapped around him as a tall jacket. Covering his face were bandages, and it wouldn't be a surprise if the rest of him were shrouded in scars.

Bruno, with his curiosity overtaking him, approached the poor man. "Hello!" he greeted happily. "What's the matter?" He realized how weird he was for suddenly coming up to a random guy like that.

Thankfully, the man returned a softened smile, taking away his formerly troubled expression. "Good morning," he replied. "Do you know where Class 2 is? Specifically, Class 102. You know, Grade 10 Class 2."

"I know. I'm a member! Let me lead you there," Bruno offered without hesitation. Then a question popped up. "You're a teacher, right? How come you don't know where the classrooms are?"

The man swallowed, turning red as he awkwardly admitted, “I’m bad at directions. Also, the layout of the school changes a lot so I can never keep up” Then he straightened his once-messy coat. “Thanks, by the way,” he added, keeping himself formal. Bruno wore a grin. “No need to mention it, sir.”

Finally, they reached class, shoving the door open to find Garcia calling out the students’ names. Her ears were only noticing now that Bruno had entered the room with a teacher.

When everyone gasped, Garcia finally turned her head to find them by her side. “Oh, hello!” she greeted with bewilderment. “Didn’t expect you to come this early, Mr. Turner.”

Turner had a hard chuckle. “You know me; always punctual!”

Garcia pointed her nose at Bruno, having to dip her head due to their height difference. She blurted out, “And I suppose you got your books?” It was clear to see thanks to Bruno’s poorly zipped bag revealing a part of his stash. “Very much so,” he retorted as he started to return to his seat. While he was navigating his way there, he noted how thrilled everyone’s faces seemed to be, their eyes widened as ever. Why?

The homeroom teacher soon muttered to herself as she drew a checkmark on her paper. “Winnie… Present…” Her forehead peeked above her clipboard. “Where’s Renard?”

The question posed frightened Max, his feet shuffling through the underside of his table. “Can everyone quit asking me? I don’t know the answer!” Obviously, he began to grow bothered by the queries about his good friend but also frustrated about not knowing. For all they knew, Renard could be in good danger! And Max was feeling clearly guilty about not doing anything to get his partner back.

Nonetheless, Garcia scoffed before noting down verbally and with a pen on Renard's row in her sheet, "Absent." Meanwhile, Turner just viewed the classroom, his eyes panned through a panorama of everyone relaxing in their seats. His warm grin blossomed, knowing how incredible the students would be, as if he didn't know them already!

Bruno seemed to be the only one other than Max to show a degree of dismay about Renard, which is odd. Perhaps he did just get busy with some other business that he didn't confide in anyone about, including his own seat partner… And his own teacher.

Finally, after shuffling some papers into a tower, Garcia dashed off without a word out of her classroom, leaving the teaching job to Turner. He had a thoughtless snicker before joking, "Too caught up in her own world. *English teachers*, am I right?" It made everyone crack a smile, though nobody laughed out loud, probably not to blatantly offend Garcia outside.

Turner prepared himself by grabbing a piece of chalk and then jotting down some words, those being "The First Day of School… With Charles Turner!" His grin told his students that he really wasn't being serious and acknowledged that it's literally been eight days since the supposed "first day of school" that he was mentioning.

"Well, good morning, students! I'm Charles Turner, your history teacher," Turner started. "As you may know, I'm an archeologist! I know, pretty cool of me." The bragging didn't even bother anyone; it just made the class admire him more. Impressed by his attempts to be relatable and like a friend to them. Everyone wallowed their "oohs" and "aahs" out. Bruno was the most intrigued, which made sense since this is the first time he has even seen the guy.

“So, what are we going to do today, Mr. Turner?” Carly, a normally uninterested student, suddenly asked, full of eagerness and life.

Turner smirked, obviously filled with ideas waiting to escape his brain, yet he seemed to have stopped himself by heavily breathing. “Let’s talk about ourselves first. It’s a tradition for me whenever it’s the start of a school year. Doesn’t matter if I’ve already known you guys for a while. Besides, I haven’t met one of you,” Turner answered, then darting his eyes to Bruno to make his final point clear. “So, just tell me, maybe once again, what are your names and ambitions?”

As soon as he said that, the class broke into a storm of prattling. When Bruno kept swishing his view across the room like a camera, he kept spotting the variety of expressions his classmates made. Some positive, others negative, though he felt it was mostly the former. They really think highly of Turner if even normal introductions elate them.

After Turner snapped his fingers, the class immediately stopped animating, just staying still in their seats with their big mouths shut. “Let’s start with Sarah here! We’ll go from left to right until the end,” Turner announced joyfully.

When Turner approached her, the face she bore was pure, genuine jubilation. Her face was almost dog-like with her muted freckles. Her wide, curly, black hair covered her entire back. “I’m Sarah Anderson and I want to be a fashion designer!” she told him with enthusiasm. Carly leaned towards her good friend and grinned. “Me too. Carly Berry here, and I’m going to be a fashion designer with her.” Bruno could tell they were close to hugging, but it never physically came to be.

Turner shrugged then padded towards the space between Craig and Sid’s seats, staring down at the former. “Craig Jerry… I suppose becoming an actor,” he admitted as if he was only thinking about his future only at this moment.

“Sid Nickelson—chef!” Sid proudly stated which lit up Turner’s once unimpressed mouth.

He strutted his way to Alex and Bruno’s seats, starting with Alex who had his table glued to the wall. “I’m Alex Wilson, the leader of this class and the son of the swimming coach, Duke Wilson. I want to be a video game developer, technician or engineer in the future,” Alex said in a monotone manner. Turner nodded, listening deeply. That piece of information wasn’t new to Bruno at all. Alex did mention his dreams back on the first day of school. “How curious of a job for you. Good thing that your aunt is a math teacher! That’s what your father told me.” Bruno gave a sharp look at his partner, who was turning red in embarrassment. With his body language, he seemed as if he was getting caught for a crime!

Then, Turner turned to Bruno, who soon became like Alex in his trembling state. “How about you, newcomer? I’m most curious about you!” Turner grinned. “Tell me everything about you, boy!”

The words of encouragement didn’t exactly pull Bruno out of his social anxiety at that moment. Alas, he had to speak up. Bruno adjusted his azure cap, keeping it away from covering his sight. As his head tried to level with his teacher, he began speaking with more assertiveness.

“I’m Bruno Ray.” After letting out those words, he instantly lost himself, almost making his mouth fall off. But he propped himself up by a hack of his throat, a possible call to speak up. “And I’m… I…” A final swallow made him recollect himself. “Back when I was a kid, I wanted to be a pilot, but in recent years, I’ve decided that my future is with writing… Being an author.” To him, it was a huge confession, and, on the inside, it truly was that way. He remembered how he described that he wanted to be a pilot on the first day of school, but after that one week, he ought to have changed his mind, and he did.

In his life, he knew many people whose ambitions were some of the most sophisticated. Firefighting, defending one's country by being a soldier, cuffing criminals as a police officer. Even being a doctor is better since they're contributing tons to society. Yet, being an inventive artist or author to Bruno? It's humiliating. But he loves creating and watching others get entertained by a multitude of genius works.

Too bad it's all words he couldn't feel at ease saying out loud. In reality, he was just a fool nicely chilling on his chair while everyone else was staring at him as if he was an alien.

Nevertheless, Turner gleamed with a mighty spark in his soul. "Well, that's incredible!" he complimented. "I don't usually meet an author in my days, both as a teacher and as an archeologist."

Bruno trampled his letters. "R-Really?" He turned flustered, dropping his head shortly. "I-I think it's lame," he admitted. "I mean, if I am going to an author, all I'm going to do is simply write some fancy words, advertise it as a story, then call it a day."

Turner had a ragged fit of laughter which slightly frightened the students around, especially Bruno who had his heart drop in a blink. "Being flashy is overrated. I think it's great that you're planning to live a quieter future! Mine is crazy as you may believe it is. Do you think I like it? Of course I do! I love what I'm doing, but I also know that not everyone will enjoy a life like mine. And it can be a bit tiresome when I'm always met with some sort of duty for the day, having my life flash sometimes," Turner spoke gracefully with a hint of a painful bang in his mind upon spouting that final sentence.

The calming notes soothed Bruno's once panicking self, as well as everyone else. The speech did touch everyone who heard it, for what he mentioned is something people tend to forget everyday. Sometimes, less is more, and that's what really matters in life.

Those wise words were what changed Bruno enough to make him adore Turner. Teachers don't usually speak like that to him.

"What do you think, newcomer?" the man asked.

After the prompt, Bruno smiled warmly. "I agree," he affirmed.

Turner smiled back before setting off to Maverick and Mandy, the kids sitting across Bruno and Alex's tables. But he wasn't really listening anymore, just being clouded by what the teacher told him. Unbothered by what his classmates tell are their futures. At a loss for what to do, Bruno lifted his head to see Alex who was watching him while he was daydreaming. Concerned, the former asked, "What's the matter?"

Alex teased in a whisper, ignoring the worry in his classmate, "Wow, being an author, I almost forgot about that. Honestly, Bruno, I've always thought you'd be the cashier type." That made Bruno's eye visibly roll and silently groan, not even speaking because he knew that sentence doesn't deserve a response from him. For a moment, he wanted to snark back by saying, "*Well, you want to be a video game developer, if that'll even work out*," but he was doubtful if it'll end well.

Bruno tuned in to listen from Sheldon onwards. His brash voice could be heard from across the room despite being from the back. Certainly, it was the volume that made it so blaring. "A soldier!" he proclaimed.

When Bruno turned back to see what was going on, he noted that Turner was simply just twisting his hips to face the next student to speak. There, Riley was being questioned. "Riley Ferris, football player," stated the boy, stirring his feet around the bottom of his table. "Not soccer, huh? I get you!" the teacher joked which sort of made some the teens laugh, but not all.

Violet spoke up, "I'm V-Violet Violin… I want to be an a-architect." Riley smiled, though just at Turner, possibly to make him confident in his

good friend beside him, which did partially work as the man shrugged in acceptance, followed by him setting off to the next row behind them. It was Winnie and Roselynn, the farthest girls from the chalkboard.

"Winnie McDonald. I only want to continue my family's agricultural legacy, or in other words, our mighty farm! Yup!" Winnie voiced in pride with her country accent. That did brighten the history teacher's spirits.

That contrasted with her partner, Roselynn's, serene melodies. "I am Roselynn Simmons, and my dream is to become a botanist," she declared. Turner's eyes widened. "Wow! So does that mean you love plants?" he prompted. Roselynn, whose head was formally dipped down, had lifted her neck up to fully gaze at her tall educator. "Of course it does. My name is a flower, minus the last four letters," Roselynn answered. The monotone delivery of the sentences really sold the fact that she was a chilled-out kid, even when she's expected to sound sarcastic.

There were still more students to get to, though it's just two: The quiet kids, Connor and Casper. Turner instantly turned to them. He bobbed his head to signal when they should start. The latter was strangely the first to open their mouth even if they were supposed to be the last student to be asked.

"I'm Casper Sigurdson. In the future, I want to be a pianist," he said.

Connor swallowed before speaking, his friend giving a reassuring look at him. "And I'm Connor Daniels. I-I would like to be a…" He paused, his cheeks flushed quickly. "M-Musician. Singer, mostly" After he admitted it, Turner's facial muscles relaxed as well as the rest of him, relieved to finally hear from everyone. Meanwhile, everyone began to mumble a bit to each other.

Bruno muttered to himself, "*Better than being an author…*" The bitterness of his tongue spat through. At first, he believed that Connor's ambition was going to be super embarrassing, yet the truth was far from it. At least Bruno had that heartwarming message from Turner to get by with his dreams.

Charles Turner stepped forward to the front of class, ahead of everyone's lines. Proudly standing, he had a clear view of the students, gazing at their satisfied expressions that made him content himself. The tender moment showed Bruno how amicable he was. The boy had a jitter in his skin, experiencing some form of déjà vu. Of course, this moment was a recreation of the first day of school introductions!

But he could also tell that, like Turner when he looked over at Renard's empty seat, a whole in his heart was created. The class definitely wasn't complete.

"I know Garcia asked this before, but really, where's Renard?" he asked.

Max, who once had his usual expression, turned tense. "I don't know," the robot instantly snapped. "I wish I *did* know." Then there was a sense of raw longing Bruno could feel deep inside when he glanced at him. "Renard has been my best friend since I got to this school. Now he could be dead…"

"Don't think of that!" Turner retorted.

But Max hissed at that second. "Mr. Turner, if anyone goes randomly missing in this school, or *any* school in this world, you know it means trouble! Especially when Darkeners are around." The last words made him flinch.

Darkeners are people who worship Utter Darkness, the demon and manifestation of all negativities in every universe. They obey the deity no

matter what, including hurting others. The thought of them never fails to irk even the most courageous, and that doesn't exclude Max. It wouldn't surprise anyone if Renard was missing because he was a victim of one of their schemes. Two teachers nearly were during the first day of school.

Turner sighed, "I get it."

Bruno's mouth gaped in fear. Perhaps the situation *is* much more dire than he expected, so he wondered: Why isn't anyone doing anything about Renard? What also got him curious is how Max could even feel anything when he's a robot, a mockery of a human being. Though with that, it does answer the question.

"Renard has always been a strange child. If I remember correctly, he's a magician, right?" Turner asked.

Spencer, the boy sitting behind Max, nodded. "He's a shapeshifter."

"Yes…" breathed Turner. "I think that he could've just shapeshifted into someone else. I don't know why he would, but that's a theory.

Nadia chuckled, making everyone stare at her with interest. "Well, you don't need to do the thinking, Mr. Turner! My friend in front of me is a detective!" she told him nonchalantly.

Turner raised a peculiar eyebrow at Bruno, who started shivering alongside Alex. "Really?" the teacher chortled. The two friends exchanged dazed looks before pointing back to the attentive Turner, flapping his jacket while he was forming a rhythm with his tapping leather boots.

"It's true, I guess. We did manage to find the missing teachers last week," Bruno stated awkwardly. Alex evidently wanted to speak up too but had to grip himself in case he would say anything he'd regret. Turner is a persistent man. If a pupil of his would make a statement, he'd mentally note any word and take it to heart no matter what the subject was. And if an odd thing was said, he would never forget about it.

“Well, if it isn’t that great! Why don’t *you* try to find Renard then?” Turner proposed. It was honestly something Bruno didn’t even consider, probably because he was scarred by the events of the first day, what he had to do to solve that mystery. If he had to experience the same steps as that, then he’d just attempt to stop being such a hero by having a darkened heart. Nonetheless, the idea was still up in the air.

“I suppose we could…” Bruno whispered. His gaze was soon fixed on his partner’s. “What’s your opinion, Alex?”

Alex slanted towards his friend, reaching his ear, as though he was about to grab it. “Bruno, you know what happened last time we solved a mystery. That was the only other time you’ve stepped foot in this horrid school. Come on!” he snapped as quietly as he could, but the lisp of his voice couldn’t save him from being heard, specifically by Turner who just had a dry glare at them.

Once Bruno noticed the looks from his peers, his head that was formerly stuck on the archeologist’s face cracked to view Alex, his nose almost touching his glasses. “Let’s think about this. Renard’s our *classmate*, not some crummy teacher. Plus, it is our sworn duty as class king and prince to be protectors of anyone in this “*horrid”* school. Didn’t you say that to my bullies?” Bruno argued, equally silent. While the reminders of the past did prickle him, he knew he had to put it behind him so he could continue to be noble. The scars can’t be there like it was earlier.

Attempting to be ignorant of the talking, Turner retreated to the teacher’s seat and had an amused look towards everyone in the room. His arms were pillars that supported his head above the fake wooden tabletop.

“Well, do you wonder what I wanted to be back in your age?” Turner asked eagerly. The switch of topic was certainly a whiplash. It’s

almost like he was avoiding talking about Renard. A cause for suspicion in Bruno. Either way, everyone yelled in unison, “Yes!” That made the teacher have a genuine fit of laughter.

“Well, I wanted to be a filmmaker!” he confessed, and it was probably the most jovial confession Bruno had ever heard. “You see, back then, my uncle was a director. Albeit, he wasn’t well known outside of Brentwood, but mother was he respected! He always had ambitions of leaving off to Hollywood. Alas, he never could because he didn’t have the funds to move out, nor were his works recognized enough. Since I admired his films a lot, I wanted to make my family proud by making them, just like my uncle, and maybe he would get a chance to be in Hollywood with my invite.” Another chuckle came. “You know where that got me though. Now I’m an archeologist and teacher.”

“Did you ever make a film?” Craig asked.

“When I was your age. My passion died out as turned twenty though, and that’s when I decided my calling was somewhere else—History! I’ve never failed a history exam as a kid, so what’s the harm in taking the subject? Yes, I started as a teacher! Then I got enthusiastic enough to get into archeology and traveling across the world,” Turner explained.

Bruno lit up upon hearing his last words. He always dreamed of traversing through the globe. Exploring, having adventures, learning about new cultures, those sorts of activities fascinated him. That was what got Bruno truly hooked in the discussion. “You mean, you traveled—”

“Across the world? Not every country, but the ones with rich history. My favorite will always be Egypt. Deserts just intrigue me! Ah, how I love my voyages…” Turner said, longing overflowing him. Those statements seemed to have intrigued the students!

Nadia whispered behind Bruno, clearly making an effort to reconnect like old times. “That makes sense. I’ve heard that seniors, people our grade and older, go on field trip with Charles… And guess what? They *always* end up out of America!” Bruno wished he could squeal in excitement, but he knew he could get himself and Nadia in a bit of a pickle, so he zipped his mouth.

Turner went on. “Being an archeologist isn’t only about cruising through the sphere of the Earth. It’s about discovering something new, discovering the wonder and magnificence that is our planet. Looking back at my youth, I was quite foolish for believing that it’s an easy task. Far from it! It’s so dangerous, yet so thrilling.”

As Turner was voicing his speech, he realized something. That could be told by the narrowing of his eyes, pointing to the ceiling lights. There was a hint of pining in his voice during the end. Continuing to stare up, he said, “You know why I asked about your ambitions?” Soon enough, his head flipped down. Everybody shook their heads, the lights shining brightly.

“Well, it’s not only because you’re sort of turning to that age where you have to think about that stuff. I was mostly thinking about how you may underestimate it. Like Bruno here, he believes that being an author is a fool’s job, when really, what he’s planning to do will change countless lives! You know how many people love to read and how much it affects them. Others have even created friends out of their passion for a fictional book, or movie, or anything!” Turner spoke, wisdom pouring out of him like a jar. “Or being a rapper or teaching martial arts. Society will benefit from you’re doing, no matter what you’re aiming to be. Don’t underestimate it, either. Nothing in life is *easy*. What I’m doing now isn’t *easy*.”

Everyone's jaws opened, stunned, awed by what was said. Even Turner was aware that they probably couldn't comprehend the words spoken. With that knowledge, he chuckled. "Sorry. I usually vent out when it comes to those older than you. Didn't have the opportunity to do that today."

"Don't be sorry! Golly, that was incredible!" Winnie cheered.

"Thanks," Turner smiled. "But I need to save my strength. It's only the first period after all."

Bruno had recalled how moments ago he was just a humble teacher, lost from the class. Suppose this is why. His mind was so stricken with these kinds of thoughts, or were too caught up with the elders, that he got lost. Either that, or he really *was* bad with directions!

The conversations went on, but they were mostly a group of students to the teacher kind of talking, not one for the whole class. Bruno was left alone flipping the endless pages that determined the future of the school year, the future of his *life*. Pages that signified what he'll be tortured with by the dusk and dawn of days to come. All the while he kept trying to keep his irises away from Alex, who was facing the wall, shrouded in his hollowness. Bruno couldn't keep his mind off what his leader could be thinking. Sadly, that was all he was left with—unanswered questions.

Chapter 3

Just Friends

At the wake of the next period, the bell rung, indicating that it's finally break time. Everyone was raring to get out of class, even if Turner was a fun teacher to discuss with. The sweet taste of any freedom just tempted them too much to get them out. The doors of every class were almost getting injured by the amount of times they were being banged open by stoked students.

Bruno was one of the first to leave, stepping side by side with his partner, Alex. The failing lights didn't seem to dim the mood; it only elevated it with what stories they may get attached to for the day.

Everyone shuffled into their own cliques. What caught Bruno's interest is how diverse the groups are in terms of different classes. There are some juniors and seniors mixed and others who were couped up with those in another class, like Carly and Sarah chatting with Chelsea, a Class 3 member.

The thing that makes such sights notable is that students from separate classes can't mingle too closely, only allowing shallow friendships. He doesn't know why though, it's just a rule that those who organized the classes came up with. Nobody told him the story behind it. But he knew deep down that, whatever fairy tale is told, it was going to be as shallow as he expected. As far as Bruno knew, it could've even simply been a rule to stir up pointless drama.

For a flutter of a moment, Bruno thought of posing that question to his good friend beside him, who was focused on the surrounding crowds snickering at each other. The corridor felt like a bar all of a sudden,

especially with the muted lighting and the coldness of Alex. His air was that of a lost, drunken man.

Bruno caught himself up, his mind telling his heart to shut up. Subservient to his thoughts, the boy dipped his head down, nearly breaking his neck.

As soon as Alex heard the tiny crack, he faced the awkward boy. “Bruno?” he asked. “Something’s bothering you.”

“Nothing’s bothering me, Alex,” assured his partner.

That did cause an eye raise from Alex. Nonetheless, he continued to move forward, ignoring the decelerating Bruno. The reason why he was decreasing his speed is to stop and stare at someone. A lump in his soul begged for him to seek out that certain someone… But who?

Of course… It was Blossom! He pushed his own brakes to see her fully with Aster. The two bullies he had to save a week ago. Indeed, Bruno did wish he could extend some sympathy for them again, he knew what they did to him. It shouldn’t be that easy to forgive them, no matter what.

What stung him more are not only the memories he had of them hurting him, but also when he was stuck underground with them and his icy leader. The time they feared getting murdered by a Darkener, Terrance. When he had the opportunity to vent with his fists to Aster. And most of all… When they rejected his offer for friendship alongside Alex. That was the nail in the coffin for his hope of rectifying things with them.

Before he could continue following Alex, however, a recognizable voice could be heard from the distance. It was sweet and high-pitched, almost having a particular flavor to it. “Bruno!” it called.

Once Bruno turned around to find out who it was, it turned out to be Blossom—the girl he was gazing at! She was as tall as he remembered. The same pink kimono-looking skirt, sleek brown hair, tipped with pink streaks and topped by a cherry blossom flower. Her head was fairly round

in a warm and cuddly way. As she was approaching him, her height really increased until she truly towered over him.

"Hey Blossom," Bruno smiled awkwardly.

For a second, his pupils turned back to slightly try to figure out where's Alex. The leader was there, but he didn't seem to be satisfied. It appears that he was indeed waiting for Bruno to come, acting as a stray dog. Alas, the ordinary boy had to move along with the conversation.

"So, uh, what's up?" he asked.

"Nothing much! Just hanging out with Aster. Wanna join?" she offered suddenly.

Bruno could spot a blurry Aster in the background. Short as he was, his fury engulfed him, evidently so by his infuriated expression.

"Wow, hang out with you… And Aster?" Bruno tried to say without stammering. "That's… Wow. Awesome."

Then, at another second's notice, his eyes shifted back to Alex, who was still waiting, but became more impatient as he grew to be as frustrated as Aster was.

"Hey, I know it's a little weird, Bruno, but look: Aster encouraged me to beat you up. Not my fault," Blossom stated. The boy snorted though. "I don't know about that."

"Trust me! I'm sorry. When we were navigating through that labyrinth of a basement, I began to realize how amazing you are. Even if we bullied you, Bruno, you still wanted to help. That's incredible! I know that if I, Aster and your friend, Alex, over there were in that situation, we wouldn't want to do anything," she told him.

That made Bruno flustered a bit, turning red in flattery. His tone turned softer. "Thanks. I think I needed to hear that today," he replied. He also understood now why Blossom turned a new leaf out of the blue. It was because of his actions that very day. Perhaps karma does exist.

Admittedly, the moment was quite dodgy. Bruno was speaking to one of the people who wished him pain the last time he knew them. Now what? They're supposed to be friends? That's absurd! Albeit, the same could be said for Alex who pushed Bruno into a pool and did nothing to save him.

"I'm sorry," Blossom repeated, seemingly reading his mind.

"No, it's ok," Bruno assured. Then he leaned to view Aster, narrowing his eyes straight into Bruno's soul now, frightening him. "I think Aster is the one who needs to apologize."

At the snap of a finger, Aster teleported to the scene, scarily at the same time as Alex. Their icy leers pierced into the riddle-stricken Bruno, both at opposite ends, the former gripping onto Blossom's shoulder.

Aster snarled, "Me? Apologize? You should be the one apologizing, you—!"

His mouth shut once Alex and Blossom struck an otherworldly look at him. As if they were possessed. It felt as if Aster was about to spill a secret. Probably the secret as to why Bruno was being picked on. Questions littered his mind. What secret is so terrible that even he shouldn't know of it? What did he do? Is it even about him? Maybe it's about The Sunnys, his old friend group he used to be leader of years before in his former school in Brooklyn.

"You're such a fool, Aster. You never should've harmed him… He's lucky to have me by his side," Alex hissed.

Aster jeered back, "*Nerd*." Meanwhile, Blossom was standing dumbfoundedly, caught in the middle of the odd rivalry between those two young men as they continued arguing. Her helpless gaze was shot at Bruno later. "Crazy, am I right?"

The charm in her eyes infected Bruno. His veins now all about her. A shiver came, butterflies in his stomach formed, all begging to flap out

of him. A perplexing warmness flowed around him like a stream of water. Finally, a mellow smile came out of him. “Yeah,” he answered with mildness.

The tender moment was crushed by Alex and Aster’s final verbal cuffs. “I don’t care about what Bruno and Blossom would like to do together, I just don’t want you to hurt him… Again!” Alex said.

Bruno couldn’t agree more with his classmate for once.

The sudden turn of Alex to Blossom jumped the blue boy. “Don’t go too far with your little friendship with him, ok? It’s illegal for students of different classes to get together,” he warned.

Blossom chuckled, “Oh, Alex! I’m not planning to date him.” But then Bruno could hear a faint whisper from her that spelled out, “*Yet*.” How subtle!

Alex gave a scornful, bold look at the two troublemakers for one last time, followed by him beckoning Bruno out of the floor with the gestures of his fingers. “Come, Bruno. We’re leaving these hooligans alone like how they always wanted.” With that, the two started to drive away from the two, but not before hearing Aster speak out again. This time, it was a blistering jab at them both. “Sure, have a fun date! Yeah, I can’t wait when Blossom eventually does this to me!”

While Bruno wasn’t peering at them, he could definitely hear their voices clearly. Blossom was the last of the two he could hear speaking, answering with a vexed note, “Aster! We’re not making plans right now.” And then a thirst for the past could be sensed. “I just… I miss the way things were…”

No more elaboration was made because the moving duo had already reached the bottom floor once their voices were drowned out by the echoes of other students’ conversations. A state of confusion overtook Bruno.

The questions continued to linger even when the two friends took their seats in the form of stairs going down to the ground itself. A memory of when they were searching for those bullies flashed in his head, yet the wondering still clouded him.

Finally, he propped himself up to speak. “I know I asked this before but: Why are they bullying me?”

Alex rolled his eyes. After, he barked, “You shouldn’t be bothered by them. I don’t care what Blossom will tell you. I don’t care what violence Aster may commit, if he even has the gull to repeat his actions after what I told him.” Obviously, he was avoiding the question. Seems like he’s in on their little secret, though it’s not like Bruno couldn’t have guessed anyhow. “They *shouldn’t* bother you.”

“You’re not answering my question, Alex. Why? What are you hiding from me?” he asked once again, now his voice falling apart.

Yet again, his friend sneered, much more viciously than before, making this statement seem like a continuation of his past ones. “And I shouldn’t tell you *everything*!”

“Pain’s grin! Why are you so defensive about this topic!? Did I somehow do something before that angered you and the others? Why is it only three new people who have anything against me, anyways?” Bruno went on. After the lash-out, he started to inhale and exhale, letting out the bottled frustration. Regret washed him. “Sorry,” he dimly added.

“It’s fine,” Alex responded, curling his lips, obviously a not genuine bit of reassurance. “Just don’t ask me or Aster or Blossom again. Or else you’ll get me turning on you too.”

Bruno swallowed, uncertainly reigning over him. The leader shook his head abundantly before slamming it to his laps. “I need the toilet,” he announced. He didn’t even say anything further when he left the stairs,

only stranding the sitting Bruno in his own wilting thoughts that withered him. No care was seen in his eyes. It was pretty clear that he just wanted to escape more questions being bashed on his head. The only hope Bruno could find now is if Blossom miraculously appeared behind him, out of nowhere, without the sight of Aster… But that was just a wish.

Yet another girl from a different class came. It wasn't Blossom at all, rather it's Blue! A little lady in Class 1 of Bruno's year, she was padding to him along with her group of friends.

She was covered in blue, as her name would suggest. An azure top with long blue sleeves, pale jeans of the sky and a bow of the color to tie her appearance off—literally. Eyeshadow of the same color hovered above her eyelids. Surrounding her were her aforementioned friends, all dressed as extravagantly as her. In particular, one was Claire, Bruno's ex from his old school. Yes, *ex*. That could be told by the pure sourness in their faces as their eyes met. The history behind it was fairly complicated, to say the least.

"Hello!" Blue joyfully greeted, waving her hands like a fool. She was standing imposingly from Bruno.

"Hi, Blue. What brings you…" Bruno paused to give one last searing glare at Claire. "And your friends here?" he asked fully.

"Oh! I just want to see you. My pals here wanted to be with me. Loyal, I know!" Blue responded, still with eagerness in her eyes.

But Bruno knew what the answer for Claire was. She came to scare him so she can see how much he's suffering without her. It's to give her the satisfaction of watching him be worse off without her, to heighten her already towering ego. Bruno's eyes narrowed straight on her, like a gun pointing to its soon-to-be-dead target.

Blue seemed to be oblivious of the tension, along with the other girls, albeit, they're more aware than her. Their confused glances scanned

through each other while Blue simply stood above the sitting Bruno, tilting his head up to view her. Finally, he woke up so his neck won't break.

"Yeah. *Loyal*," he mumbled.

Blue widened her jaw before Claire interjected with a disapproving shake of her head that the colored girl somehow noticed at the corner of her sclera. Soon enough, Claire started speaking, her raspy voice being so different from her past soothing one Clearly, the breakup broke her. "Don't make genuine advances, any of you," she warned,

"Why not? Bruno's cool!" Blue whined.

Claire scorned. "He's not *cool*, trust me. Besides, he's a random boy from another class. You shouldn't have to do anything with him!"

An olden look came from Blue, tired of her good friend. "Oh, please," she brushed off. "Let me do what I want. I'm fine with facing the consequences if that's what you're worried about." Then she chuckled. "Is that why you came here? Girls, you know better!"

They didn't seem to, apparently. Moving on were their perplexed glances at each other, all at a loss for words as to not instigate anything further. Meanwhile, Claire had a wolf-like look and edge to her that Bruno hadn't seen from her since he left his former school. She certainly had more of a raging impression on Bruno. Blue didn't seem to whimper at all, though. She was only standing there, giving her friend a good look of disgust. That made Claire cringe in response.

"Blue, you should be the one knowing better," she hissed quickly.

Bruno suddenly raised his voice. "Leave her alone!"

"Why should I listen to you, you—"

Claire couldn't finish what was being said, for she was swiftly stopped by Pearl, a member of the group. "Come on," she whispered. "Let's leave Blue be. We don't care about your grudge with Bruno."

The leader gasped, almost breaking her thorax with the levels of oxygen she had to breathe. “How could you say that!?” she blaringly rasped.

“Let’s not waste more time arguing, Claire,” Candace, another girl, advised. “Blue is our swell friend! We should always support her, even if her actions are against the rules and your specific opinions.”

With that argument, Claire spat out a “hmph” then was the first to set off inside the campus, only showing off her back and extended blaze hair, twirling with the wind. Resentment ate her up, and it appears that even her friends can’t save her from the death of her mind when she’s in any radius with her ex. Nonetheless, they continued to follow her. Even they didn’t say anything more to Blue due to their genuine shock over what just happened. Mutterings spread through the airwaves while they were trotting inside.

Uncomfortably, Bruno had to watch as they all left the scene before he was fine with expressing his emotions, although Blue beat him to the punch.

“Sorry about them. They’re ridiculous, but when they’re not fawning over something, they’re brilliant friends,” Blue confessed.

A grin was on Bruno, the sun reflecting off him them to Blue’s ocean irises. “I know. Claire has always been like this… Ever since we broke up,” Bruno heaved deeply. The recollection of the agonizing days struck him coldly. Amidst the traumatizing moment, Blue spoke, “I thought you and Claire would move on. I mean, it’s been since the fourth grade, right? You’re at tenth!”

That definitely put more salt in the wound, a sword into his already holed soul. Trembling, his dismay increased. The bitter scars dug so far to the point where it was bottomless.

“Bruno?” Blue called, shaking her palms ahead of him. That woke him up.

“Sorry, uhm.” He tried to stop stuttering. “It’s not easy to move on from a breakup. I’m guessing you don’t know how it feels yet.” Blue nodded, showing massive sympathy with her relaxed eyelids.

Bruno soon experienced a bit of strangeness in his heart. He was sharing so much to a stranger who could possibly be his enemy if the circumstances were dire enough between classes. It may be over the course of the year, but there’s a chance of a war happening among them. Blue knows his vulnerability, and it was all his fault. Yet, at the same time, he didn’t doubt that she did want to truthfully befriend him. Hopefully, his guts were correct.

“I’m glad to be a fool in that sense!” Blue giggled. Then her face chilled once more. “I’m sorry if I did scare you too. It’s a bit weird… A girl from another class trying to get along with you. I get it if you’re too scared to talk to me.”

Bruno shook his head. “No, I’m not! It’s just that, I know my leader—who is supposed to be here—wouldn’t be all hunky-dory about me being friends with you.”

Blue gaped her mouth, “Of course. Alex! He’s super strict, such a rule-follower. My classmates would call him a sheep!” As if that statement wasn’t obvious.

Bruno sighed in defeat. “I know…”

“Well, *I* don’t care about the rules. So, can we really be friends?” she asked, reckless abandoned.

The flutter of Bruno’s heart begged him to accept the offer, while his calculating brain pleaded to decline it, to get out of distressing ordeals. Thinking of all the outcomes of any choice, he finally concluded to one before he could sense the presence of his class leader. “Yes,” he agreed.

Blue squeaked in excitement. “We’ll be such good friends, I promise!”

Admittedly, she did appear to be in a rush. That’s probably why she didn’t preface this with a casual conversation or any mention of what they’ve done the last time the boy was present in the school. So, she just dashed into asking for a friendship with someone she grew to adore, although she did also disclose that she did like him even on the first day, when he was stuck in her class for detention.

“I think we will be, Blue,” Bruno responded, robotically. At least he has one candid friend, not the nearing king who flip-flop on his opinions of Bruno or the bully that wants to continue torturing him or the lackey of said bully, wishing to mend her immediately strained relationship with him. There *was* Nadia and some of Bruno’s other classmates, but they could be argued to just be fair weathered acquaintances rather than anything genuine he hoped to develop.

Deep down, Bruno could also guess that Blue didn’t want to be only friends with him. Oh, no. Far from it. She blatantly wanted to get together with him, despite having one of her closest pals having hated him before and knew full well how that turned out. Either that, or he was really stuck in a delusion, in that longing state he lingered on with Claire.

It didn’t matter, seeing as Bruno yearned for a true friendship with someone that didn’t start off as anything toxic. “Now, can you go? Sorry to say it, but Alex is coming.”

Once Blue turned her head to find him, she flinched. “Oh!” she exclaimed. Soon enough, she scattered away inside the gate to the corridors.

Bruno grinned oddly, making it a bit obvious that he was preoccupied with some other matter in his mind while Alex finally ended his march towards him.

“Was that Blue?” he instantly asked.

There was a sharp spike in his body caused by the question. Alex seemingly found out—and how can’t he? Blue was standing over Bruno for a span of over five minutes while he was taking his time reaching the stairs where they’re next to. Of course she was discovered! When Bruno realized this, he sure was appalled. Though, even if Blue escaped in time, there’s no fool-proof way to hide her from the leader, because he *can’t* be fooled.

Ashamed, Bruno confessed. “Yeah.”

“What were you doing—mingling with her?” Alex spat.

Bruno grinded his teeth silently, not opening his mouth to not make it obvious, to not irritate his friend further. “Nothing much,” he muttered.

“Yes… *Nothing much*…” Alex slowly growled. Then he swung his head in disappointment but pretended to be indifferent. “Don’t worry. I don’t really care if you’ll befriend her or anything. Just don’t give the class a bad reputation.”

In obedience, Bruno ducked to the grid ground. “Alright, Alex.” The rules now linger in his mind, specifically about fraternizing with those from other classes. The existence of that law itself is unfathomable. His classmates’ assumptions regarding its formation were probably right.

There was a chance it was created because of some moronic grievance one of the leaders had. Although he can’t deny that it could’ve also been to cause even more drama. After all, rebels tend to be subjects of rumors. Rebels of a student-created code to stir up desirable conflict—now that’s clever.

Once he gripped himself back to reality, Bruno blankly gazed at Alex’s chestnut eyes. “Are you planning to get together with her?” the leader hissed.

“What? No!” Bruno loudly denied. “I swear, I just see her a friend.”

Alex started to sound super exasperated, like he was about to lose his breath in full frustration. “You’re kidding me. First with Blossom from a minute ago, now Blue?”

“Blue was from the first day. You know… When we got detention in her class,” Bruno argued, his melody changed back to how it usually was. “We’ll be just friends.”

The endless insistence bothered Alex to the point where he didn’t seem to believe it. Likely, he was right, at least in Blue’s end. It’s clear as glass that Blue wanted to be more than friends with the ordinary boy, and he knew it from the tone of her voice. Yet, he can’t get himself to like her that way. Would he want to hurt her feelings, though?

Alex sighed. “I hope you know what you’re doing.” His lament poured out of every word. Bruno had a reassuring smile. “I do. Don’t worry.” It appears that his friend was reluctant to believe it, however.

After some exchanging looks, the two friends sat properly and had a short snack with some sandwiches Bruno stored in his backpack, trying to forget about what just happened. While the boy in blue did manage to get over it, Alex didn’t. His face still scrunched from his vitriol.

Still, Bruno kept himself quiet as to not elevate the situation. The genius was already pricked enough about him. He’d rather improve their unstable friendship than break it to a greater extent.

To lighten the mood, he tried to find something sweet buried in his pockets, perhaps a lollipop he forgot about from the many times his father brought one for him. Finally, he uprooted a piece of candy, an apple toffee.

“Hey Alex,” he called briefly. Quickly, the said kid rotated to be amused by the toffee. “Here, have some candy for your troubles,” Bruno offered jovially.

Alex snatched it from his palm without a second thought, tearing the wrapping apart. His mouth watered. “Apple toffee! Thanks!” lit up the leader. The twinkle in Alex rubbed off on Bruno, his eyes now shining like his companion. He couldn’t even respond, for he was caught up in trying to predict the outcome of his generosity.

With that, he devoured the concentration of sugar beneath his mouth, savoring the pure sweetness of it with the hint of the bitterness of a green apple. Chewing as much as he could to continue relishing in the pleasurable taste, Bruno stared at him, now wishing he kept it instead to revel in consuming it. Although he wasn’t the one eating, he could feel the very tinge of the candy, the nostalgic moments tied to when he had them in his childhood.

The intimate minutes made Bruno feel like he was closer to his proclaimed friend in some way. Once Alex was done, he gave a mild glance at him, now beaming in his euphoria. While no words were said, Bruno still had a flicker of tenderness etched in his skin, getting the inside impression that he would be literally flying if he could.

“You didn’t need to do that,” Alex chuckled.

“I know. I, well, had some sympathy for you,” Bruno admitted. He breathed. “It must be hard being a leader, trying to control a bunch of rebellious people.” His head drooped, almost reaching his knees that were bent so he could sit.

“It is,” Alex grimly told him. The sudden higher volume heaved Bruno’s head. “I’ve never said it’s easy, but it’s an important job.” Then he chortled. His face that was once pointed down directed to Bruno instead, warming up. “I won’t punish you that badly. I won’t do anything to anyone as long as they don’t cause genuine trouble. You get me?”

Bruno nodded profusely. “That’s what I’ve been saying! I swear with my life, I won’t cause scenes or anything like that!”

“Good,” Alex grinned.

It appeared that the candy really did mellow him out since he was fairly aggressive earlier. Either that or he was just hangry… Or he was actually upset and it’s being shoved away by distractions. It’s uncertain, but for now, he was satisfied with Bruno.

Seconds of silence followed, though it was almost a thousand years. Bruno had an urge to spout something. Alas, his anxiety held him back. His body screamed for him to start another conversation, one of a general topic to fully establish their friendship. No calls worked, sadly.

Chapter 4

Snuck In

After the peculiar break, Bruno and his friend entered the indoor part of the school, the former still setting their sights on Aster and Blossom who he guessed were lurking like predators to prey for him. Passing the many hollow walls and the ascending stairs, Bruno and Alex finally reached the floor that belonged to them and their peers.

It was crowded as expected. Everyone from four senior grades were dispersing to their respective classes and Bruno and Alex weren't exceptions, determined to return. However, the former felt someone padding towards him steadily, mixed with a bunch of tapping shoes not from the surrounding, but in a group with that certain someone.

The sounds of the steps grow more violent. Inching closer and closer with every tap Bruno makes. He shivered, having a tingling itch in him to turn back, sensing deeply that someone was stalking him. He didn't look behind because he could imagine that the tracker was a random kid, simply chasing his shadow brainlessly.

Still, he can't shake the feeling that the bangs meant something. The temptation swallowed him whole, getting him to act up. An impulse to twist his body invaded his nerves,

Bruno put the brake on eventually, leaving Alex to trot alone to Class 2. He didn't even seem to be bothered to check on him, the ordinary boy only being able to see his back, ignoring him, focused on reaching the room ahead.

His neck stretched backward, attempting to find who was pursuing him. That's when he managed to meet his gaze at a familiar face, among the pack of other known teens.

It was Blue! Her face was as uplifting as it was before. The sudden appearance of her stunned the boy to the point where he visibly flinched with a huge yelp. "Blue!" he exclaimed.

"Greetings!" she beamed.

"What do you want?" Bruno slowly questioned, trying to not glare back to his classroom to avoid feeding into his desire to escape there. He had that same nagging feeling he had when he was with Blossom in the same position. The feeling that he's doing something sinful.

"I'd like to invite you to my class!" Blue answered in a squeal.

That sudden offer startled the young man. He had already been to Class 1 before—that was established earlier, drilled into the pair's minds. And it wasn't a short check-in; the visit was for detention that lasted half of a forty-five-minute period. Staying in that class as punishment was one thing but basking in it as if it's some vacation was even more asinine… That's something else.

"Class 1?" Bruno bristled, his irises trying to avoid meeting Blue's. "I don't know…"

"Come on, it'll be fun!" the girl insisted. But Bruno had shards of hesitation in him, manifesting in a tense, unsure expression. His fingers twitched along with him, fidgeting around in a conflicted circle. Sweat poured around him like there was a bucket that damp him. When Blue noticed, she smirked as she conjured up an idea. "What lesson are you having now?"

Bruno returned his once dubious eyes to that of the sharp blue ones of the girl. "According to Alex: French." Then he lit up as he realized it. "*French*," he shortly repeated, his pupils now shrunken in the paralysis.

“French?” Blue pondered.

Her friend nodded, then he elevated his head for an intense sigh. “I hate French,” he confessed.

“Then you can be with me!” the girl lit up.

Bruno thought about the decision once more. It doesn’t seem like there are any net negatives of going other than being spotted breaking the rules, but do they exist if the perpetrator doesn’t get caught? Finally, he concluded, “Alright then.” He’d rather cause trouble rather than study the arduous French language, at least arduous for him.

One last time, Bruno glanced behind him to check if Alex was there, waiting for him firmly ahead of the class’s door. As expected, he wasn’t present, supposedly already locking himself in the room. With that knowledge, the boy had a murky grin.

Then he turned to the eager Blue, voracious to have the Brooklynite by her side. Her hands jostled in the surge of energy sparking in every fiber of her being, as if she was going to explode in her insatiable hunger to spend time with him.

“Should we go then?” Bruno asked.

Without any words being spoken, Blue dipped her head up and down in a flash, showing how enthused she is about him. “Come on!” She signaled the way to Class 1 with the point of her extended index finger.

The classroom was far in the end of the stretching line that houses the four tenth grade classes, the first row of classes to be seen upon entering from downstairs. Strangely the first among the other four years inhabiting the ground, those being the ones who attended the assembly: Ninth, eleventh and twelfth. The school *was* wide enough to accommodate four grades per floor.

Nonetheless, the duo advanced, walking alongside the other Class 1 members into their room. They were strangely the last group to enter their walls. Oh well. Blue wasn't even reacting, as if this was normal.

Once they passed the door duplicated from every other class, Bruno finally got to fully eye the magnificence of the novel room. Last time, he was there for punishment, now it's for recreation—how curious! His jaw gaped at the purity of the sight, the wonder of every exquisite detail of the walls. It wasn't as decorated as his class planned their room to be, but he expected them to be some competition eventually. It's not like they already aren't, though.

The first words he heard out of the class since he left it a week ago was: "Hey! What is that class prince doing here?!"

When Bruno twisted his head to view the source of the voice, he found Ryder, the president of the class, and Robin, another member, padded up to level with him, seeming as determined as his leader.

Blue shrieked, aghast. "Alex sent him here," she lied, trying not to dart her eyes away as to avoid making herself suspicious.

Ryder snarled, "Why?"

"He wanted to borrow something. As his right-hand man, he trusted me to do that job. Too attached to his class, you know!" Bruno smiled.

While the leader seemed apprehensive, Robin narrowed his eyes, keeping his cold gaze at the troubled Bruno and Blue. When Robin nudged the president's shoulder, he took quick notice and glanced at him. There wasn't much of a faint whisper, the muttering that took place was rather unclear but not enough to confuse the Class 2 member's great listening skills.

"I think they're lying. Just look at him. He's sweating and all that! Same goes for Blue," Robin mumbled.

After that, Ryder raised his head even higher, staring down at Bruno as if he was a towering emperor. “My vice president doesn’t lie,” he spat, his glare growing more throbbing by the seconds.

What he was showing surely was a stark contrast as to how he was treating Bruno a week ago. His kindness transcended even Bruno’s warmness. Yes, he acknowledged that class separation is important, *somehow*, but he shouldn’t be scrutinized so harshly for his mere presence.

Bruno finally broke and metaphorically raised his arms. “Fine! I was invited here, and I decided to come. I wanted to skip French, ok? I know nothing about the damn language! I was bullied enough for—”

“Ok!” Ryder yowled to stop him from recounting additional grievances. Bruno’s speech was rushed, his mouth kept blazing, swifter than the speed of light. Every word contained every memory of how his hectic middle school life was. His soul heaved more after every tick of a clock, especially after noticing all the other students watching him. He was the fool in a stupid play, now what?

Amid his turmoil, however, he took one last glance at the president, a sign for a pleading of sympathy and mercy. But instead of the convulsive expression that he was expecting, Ryder changed it to that of compassion. That warmth Bruno longed for had returned.

“Are you ok?” Ryder asked in a fragile voice.

Bruno held his gaze longer, now turning to Robin who also turned sympathetic, but not as much as his leader. “I’m fine,” assured the boy.

When Ryder took his eyes off the newcomer, his sight met that of Blue’s icy ones. It was formerly disturbed but once Bruno spoke up again, it turned to that of a puppy. An impish pleading to keep him. It’s nearly like he’s a pet!

Eventually, Ryder sighed, feeling pitiful. “You can stay here,” he declared. Robin flinched upon hearing that, knowing now that his input

didn't really matter. Bruno had the same action too, stunned at how he was accepted to sit in the same seat among them. "But don't do anything weird. Oh, and none of you place the blame on anyone in this room but yourselves."

Ryder was about to open his mouth again, but would rather breathe yet again, now having notes of regret. "Sorry for being a bit cold. It's my duty as leader to be a little strict towards you. As class prince, you should also understand that," he told the boy.

He nodded, now self-assured. It was expected that the president would be stringent on him. Standards exist after all.

"I know that too—that feeling. It's not good what you're doing but… Blue will be restless and invite her friends to gossip about me until we graduate," Ryder shamefully admitted, turning red, which made Bruno hold back a hard giggle.

Suddenly, a middle-aged man appeared right behind Bruno, as if he was a shadow. When there was a tap in the boy's shoulder, he instantly twirled his head to find him. After jerking, the man hissed, "What's going on here?" Even Blue and Ryder seemed stumped, staring vacantly.

The distance between him and Bruno was miniscule, almost too close for comfort. Their heads even leveled, indicating his height. Bruno cowered, being a rabbit in front of a fox. His heart raring to just get away. "N-nothing…"

"Sit in your places, now!" the man demanded, sounding like a drill sergeant.

Everyone obeyed, scampering to their seats, though Bruno squeezed in Donatello's chair, the one next to Blue's. It was a game of musical chair, and the boy was the poor sore loser.

"What's up with you?" the man asked.

“Uhm…” Bruno stammered, believing he had to speak for himself, shrouded in anxiety. But Blue came to the rescue by talking over him. “We’re missing a chair!”

The man’s eyes relaxed, though there was no denying that he also had an air of suspicion. “Alright,” he murmured.

Before Donatello was about to put down his own words, Blue covered his mouth and sweated even more, her eyes twitching insanely quickly. Everyone else was viewing the scene like they’re witnessing a crime. Admittedly, it was but their faces would suggest it was a murder they were watching.

“I won’t even bother giving you a chair…” the man sighed, closing his eyes in a hint of being crushed under pressure. The pure-hearted Bruno noticed, wishing to articulate his jaws of empathy, but held himself back to make an effort to think. After a flash, however, he couldn’t handle keeping it any longer. “Why?” he blurted.

Blue glared at him, alongside Claire and even a confused boy, both behind their seats. Searing, piercing through him like a dagger.

Yet the man widened his eyes, feeling a sense of comfort somehow, connecting to the boy he just met. “Don’t get me started!” he exclaimed, trying not to chuckle to cover his anguish. Clearly, he was too tense to properly form his sentences afterwards, too caught up in his own issues.

“Yikes, ok… I don’t think I need to know then” Bruno whispered, having a degree of shame to say that.

When the man finally gave him some eye contact, there was a pounding sensation that he appeared to be familiar. He can’t trace why, but there was something off. Then it hit him… The man—he was a larger copy of Spencer, his own classmate! The puzzle pieces flied in his brain.

Sadly, he couldn’t speak up since he was lost in thought and the man had already gone off to stand in front of the middle of the chalkboard,

Donatello's hip still attached to Bruno in such an irksome manner. Though, for some reason nobody can explain, the Class 1 kid was… Enjoying it? His broad smile made that evident. The aroma surrounding him was also that of pleasure.

No discussions could be made since the man started to speak. His voice jagged as ever. "As you may know, I am Edward Jones, though I am informally referred to as Ted as well." The harmony was robotic, like he was reading a script.

Jones… Bruno still remembered his puzzle. Then it clicked at once. That was the surname of Spencer. Those words confirmed the fact that Ted may be Spencer's father or at least related! He had an urge to ask him to clarify himself, but his throbbing heart held him back to what could be the solution to a minor mystery. He was about to vomit harshly in the tensity of his soul.

"I won't be wasting time on introductions since I've already known you lot so well," Jones went on, clearly ignoring the black sheep ahead of him. "So, let's start with the basics of geography first."

The mention of geography flared Bruno. One of the subjects he had a grand amount of knowledge on is that. Indeed, the difference between which period he'd be trapped in is like night and day in terms of his opinions on it. His hatred of French makes him eviscerated whereas geography is a favorite of his, at least among a sizeable group of others.

While he was thinking, sounds of chalk squeaking infected everyone's ears, ringing constantly to remind them of what was going on. When Bruno woke up from his train of thought, he saw what the teacher was drawing. It was the flag of America as told by the soothing blue canton, striking red and white stripes. As the last part, there were the snowy stars sprinkled, surrounding the indigo rectangle at top, which were formed like the lines of the same color—using the board eraser to create

a shape. Then he continued but now drawing the borders of America with the white stick under him.

Soon enough, it was over. The sound of the descending chalk was sharp, blasting. The snap of his turning neck woke up students too. “As you may know: This is the flag of our home, the United States of America, and that’s the shape of our country.”

Once he turned his head away, he drew a wide circle with it, enclosing the map. Yet again, he twisted back to face the students. “This part is called the contiguous United States or the contiguous forty-eight or simply mainland United States. It means that it’s the part of the nation that doesn’t contain Alaska and Hawaii.”

Everyone nodded in unison, even Bruno who had prior familiarity with the subject. He pondered if anyone else had the same know-how as him about geography. To him, the information being given is common knowledge

“As every American would know, there are fifty states. What not all of us can do, however, is to name all of them. Who can do that task?” Jones asked.

Bruno lit up. *He* knew the name of every state!

When his eyes paced, searching to see if anyone raised their fingers, he couldn’t find that non-existent person. So, he did that, his arms extending as high as a cliff. When Jones found him, though, his glare was a solid boulder as it crashed to the young boy’s view. Still seemingly amused at the sight of two little men attempting to relax on a single seat.

“Ok… You,” he groaned. It was obvious that, if anyone else lifted their arm that the teacher would pick them instead. Alas, that didn’t happen. “Come here,” the man ordered, gesturing his thumb to his back, pointing to the board

Joyfully, Bruno bounded closer to it, then opened his vocal cords. “Let’s start with the obvious ones!” he declared.

The boy’s eye darted to the four markers of peculiar colors that he had seen before but didn’t assume that they were the exclusive shades: It was blood red, royal blue, forest green and night black. For a wandering moment, he half-hoped that there were yellow, purple and pink as well, though it was just a fleeting idea.

He clumsily picked up the only chalk there, for some reason. There was no use for the pens except to taunt him. Weird. He used it to scrape some letters together to form a coherent word.

“New York,” it read.

“California,” continued the board.

“Texas.”

“Florida.”

“Hawaii,” he muttered. “Then Alaska.”

Each name belted out after the other, spewed by the messages from the screaming board after every scratch. The newfound environment didn’t seem to intimidate Bruno any longer, for he was confidently jotting every state. The screeching made by the pens started to turn into music. Mindlessly writing, which isn’t an abnormal action for him. Every carving of a letter symbolized his triumphant pride over the abundant knowledge he had over the subject. Delicate, eloquent, ornate over the finest details the boy drew.

For the graceful span of writing the answer, he could sense everyone behind him dropping their jaws in pure astonishment, including Mr. Jones. Overwhelmed by his abilities. Though there was also a nagging voice telling him that this might be the only extraordinary thing about him. The thought of that haunts him.

Finally, it ended.

The scribbles resulted to a whole list of all the American states, from New Jersey to Oregon.

When Bruno turned his head to discover the reaction of everyone, his first sight was set on Mr. Ted Jones, whose motion was of a brick while the rest of the room were stuck in their seats. That caused the boy to jerk in morbid shock, though strangely in pleasure. It was tempting for him to speak up, yet he wanted someone else to do the talking regarding the board. Luckily, it was the teacher himself.

"Well done," Jones commented. His eyes flickered in a bit of amusement. "I've never seen a student like you who could do this off the top of their heads. What's your name?"

Bruno jittered as soon as he received that question. He swallowed, "I'm Bruno Ray."

A screech from a table could be heard from two rows away. As they turned their heads, the teacher and his student watched as another opened their mouth. "He's not from his class!" the pupil jeered.

It was Claire, Bruno's ex, striking back once again to terrorize him. This time, it's using the mortifying weapon of humiliation. Not that didn't work, since her enemy was pouring sweat like a maniac. The looming Jones stared over him, a horrifying statue glaring.

"You mean to say… You snuck into class?!" he roared.

"I can explain—!"

Bruno gulped, biting his tongue once his gaze met that of the angered man again. Blue, meanwhile, was gritting her teeth in despair, knowing that she might get in trouble too if her friend tells the truth. So, to save her further shame, she gaped her mouth.

"I brought him here!" she yelped.

Bruno flinched. A murmur from him could be heard, though faintly. "I wasn't going to snitch on you!" All it could be was just his lips moving.

All this time, his brain was twisted, lingering over Claire who should've just calmed down and quit being a tattle tale. But he knew why she did this, there were no less obvious ulterior motives imbued in her. She wanted to spite him, her ex. It's scummy, but he has always known Claire to be this way. Always rubbing dirt on his name. This was a clear opportunity to disgrace him like that, especially in front of her own class.

When Bruno was searching for other students' reactions, he could find Ryder, who was just planting his face on his table, totally engulfed in embarrassment.

Among the crowd was also Mercury, now joined in with other students who were muttering to him about the situation. There had to be Kevin with him, as he assumed… But also, interestingly Laurel… And Ivan. They weren't seen the last time they were in Class 1, but he saw the former shortly after the detention.

Mercury was the leader of Team Toxic; the friend group Aster and Blossom were members of. A band of troublemakers, they set out to wreak havoc across the school. Bruno was aware that Laurel was a member but didn't even know that Ivan was there. Indeed, he knew him as well, the same as his seat partner, Laurel, since Ivan was a member of the Brooklyn branch, albeit quite later into his years there.

And what towered over all that confusion was their presence in the classroom. They just weren't there the last time Bruno came, unless they were preoccupied with something else… Perhaps so. He can't deny that he was puzzled at seeing two empty seats behind the entire class other than Mercury and Kevin's.

Despite all those thoughts dominating him, there was a glimmer in him, wishing that they'd support him. Alas, they kept their silence, only making sound out of their whispering.

Jones growled with grit, undeniably filled with ire over the situation. His eyes had a searing ember of fury, lashing out at Blue instead of Bruno, indicating that he is truly blaming her for this—and in actuality, she was.

"How dare you?!" Jones rasped, every word sounding like a single sentence each. Before he was about to continue, Blue interjected, "I'm sorry! I only wanted to—"

"Quiet now!" the teacher bursted, his voice turning bleak. His head then sharply angled towards Bruno. "*You*," he breathed heavily, his lungs flying. "You get back to your class, whatever it is!"

"Class 2? Alright," Bruno hissed. He gave one last stare at Blue, piercing her, making her feel small as she hid under her table while her seat partner, Donatello, had a subtle smirk. "It has been fun," he sighed.

But he didn't realize the mind-blown expression on the teacher's face until he swung his head out of the door. That's when he swiftly glanced back at him, perplexed. "Mr. Jones?" Bruno murmured.

"Class 2. That's where my son is," he announced.

Nobody's eyes seemed to have widened. It appears that it was common knowledge to everyone except, well, Bruno, who was the complete opposite of the others. His theory came true. "Spencer, right?" he questioned. Jones nodded, now showing a bit of clarity in his mind. Bruno had a bit of warmness in his heart before he escaped the class.

There was a sense that, behind him, Jones was standing foolishly, ignoring the scolding that everyone expected from him. He might've even hinted at this for Blue, yet the newcomer had already reached his own class and still heard nothing. Weird.

Then that's where it struck him. On the first day, Bruno was told that Spencer's mom died, at least that's what Nadia told him. If his mom was dead, then that would mean Ted Jones's wife would be a goner too. That's probably why he might've been sentimental thinking about his son.

Nonetheless, something else had to be in mind: Reaching Class 2. And he eventually entered as he curved between doors, doing so not without his bruised ego, of course. He anticipated some glares from the students, and there it was—the nightmare-fueled stares of his classmates.

There, in front of the chalkboard, was a petite lady, dressed in a dazzling frilly sky skirt, with a snow sweater and a wine collar. But the most magnificent part of her was her smooth, dashing, brown hair, as brown as freshly watered soil. Even her eyes were that of a sparkling sapphire.

As she turned to get a look at the newcomer, her hair swished in the air. Once it landed to its normal position, Bruno finally watched her lips move. It's as graceful as she looks, as well as her voice. "Why, hello, child!" she greeted, in an obvious French accent, but in a majestic manner. "Are you a member?"

Bruno awkwardly stood there. Both in trying not to blush and to avoid the ardent glares of his classmates. All he could reply was that of admission and shoddy stammering, "Y-yes, I am."

Strangely enough, she wasn't as steaming as the rest of the people in the room. As a matter of fact, she was fairly pleased, her only negative emotion could be that of frustrated curiosity. "Where were you?"

"I'm sorry… I snuck into Class 1… I wanted to…" He swallowed, just like he would with his pride at the moment… Though he admittedly didn't have much from the moment he left his old school. "I wanted to avoid your class."

The teacher huffed. "Do better next time and don't escape my class." Now her look was much more furious than earlier.

Bruno ducked. "Yes, ma'am."

At last, however, the bell rang, much to his relief.

Chapter 5

The Dark Arts

The teacher grinned broadly, her teeth beaming at every student with the pure whiteness of it once she turned to them. Even her energy level was high. She seemed to be a glamorous woman, so young-looking, yet she could very well be as old as Garcia—being in her 40's. Stereotypically, French ladies are the suave and exquisite type. She was no exception.

"Well, you hear that! It's time for the next period!" she declared.

Everyone just sat there, still narrowing their eyes on Bruno like a gun aiming at an assassin's victim. That made the newcomer shudder, overtly so.

"Say goodbye to Ms. Sylvia!" the teacher pleaded, continuing to stand over everyone behind the desk. Finally, the students pinned their sights to her, but in the carried angst. "Goodbye Ms. Leclerc," they recited in unison.

For one last time, she gazed at everyone, turning her head around to get a full picture. Clearly lost, she just scrambled out without even acknowledging Bruno any further. That left him feeling totally destroyed. Abashed over his crimes.

He sluggishly slid himself to his seat, trying not to sense the friction his feet are experiencing from the continual pushes and pulls of it. As he gawked at his classmates, he could find that they were in a mix of dismay, appearing betrayed and perplexion. There certainly were some turmoil and uproar going on, and he hated knowing that he was the subject of it. What a time to turn back to: Middle school, or even elementary back in Brooklyn. He was always the talk of the class. Looks like that haven't

changed. If anyone was looking from the outside in, he would've committed a serious form of adultery!

Once he finished his walk, he dropped himself immediately to his chair, plummeting like his mental state at the moment.

When he glanced at his leader, he noticed how fierce he was. Scalding his mind. That made Bruno taste his putrid emotions, immediately regretting even looking back at anyone, less so the person he'd consider the closest to a friend. He tried to cover his mouth with his overgrown bit of turtleneck, yet he could feel a confrontation coming just from his spine sensing it behind him. Shivering, he sat, facing away from his partner.

Then… It finally happened. Amidst the discourse in the mist out of his ears, Bruno was confronted by Alex, his ticked off class leader. Irritated by the obvious. "Bruno," he rasped.

But the boy continued to only show his back that is his scarlet bag.

He could feel the seething growl of the leader. "Bruno!" he repeated. The newcomer quivered even further, though so subtly.

"You know what I'm going to say, don't you? I'm no fool to realize that," Alex snarled, heaving his head high. At this point, they looked like an arguing old married couple on the brink of a divorce.

Bruno continued to shudder, now visibly trembling with his teeth grinding. He'd rather have dentures to avoid being so obvious. After minutes of harrowing silence, he finally caved in to speak up. "I do…" he answered flimsily.

Alex inhaled then exhaled. "I know that I'm predictable, but I have to tell you, Bruno. Please don't just break the rules like this!" The sense of urgency in his voice heightened the newcomer's fear. "It's not worth it."

Bruno soon enough turned back to check on his leader, who was shattered at this point. A brutal concoction of chagrin and fury brewed in him, manifested in his ragged expression. That made his subject jerk.

"I'm sorry, Alex," Bruno sighed as he solidified himself.

"A sorry doesn't rewind time," Alex grimly told him. "Don't repeat this again. I'm not going to stick up for you anymore."

As if Alex stood up for me right now, Bruno harshly thought, visibly cornering his eyes to the top right. *Or any other time*.

Alex huffed. For a heartbeat, Bruno could feel a form of regret in his leader when he dipped his head. Soon, he lifted it. "I must act strict on you, Bruno. I'm your *leader*. You're my *second-in-command*. We're supposed to be role models," he went on, probably trying to answer a question formed in his clever brain.

Strangely enough, he didn't seem as upset as Bruno expected. Did he begin to be mellow or was he acting calmer because he didn't want to cause any further conflict about the situation? Clearly, there was some gossip judging from the scornful looks on everyone, so it could be the latter. Still, it's a mystery.

"I understand, Alex," affirmed Bruno.

The leader smiled. Relief came about to the young class prince. At least Alex didn't cause a ruckus with his rage, or else things will be worse tenfold.

"I don't even know how you escaped my sight so easily though. I was walking with you, then you just… disappeared! But I was too late to notice. That was my mistake," confessed Alex.

Bruno continued to nod. "Well, I won't just leave off like that again." He couldn't burst out an "I promise" because, deep down, he did know that he might try to hang out with Blue or even attempt at Blossom.

Dreading that moment, he tried to quell his contrite by grinning back at his friend.

"Good," Alex sharply said, ignorant of what's storming in his trusted prince's mind. "Although you have told me earlier how you won't cause trouble, yet you have just now."

That certainly shook Bruno's back. *Oops*.

"But it's fine. You're a newcomer," Alex assured, though it did seem ingenuine. Cold. Harsh. Secretly so. But Bruno brought that, at least pretended to. No more scenes, not anymore for now. "I'll let you off the hook."

Once that was said, Bruno twirled his head around to find his classmates warming down, looking like they'd moved on. Quite odd as it has only been a couple of minutes since he crashed the class. Nonetheless, he accepted their quick silent forgiveness.

As murmurs came, the door slammed open. It was from the hectic man who came in—a curious moustache man. He wasn't as imposing as the other teachers, but he still had a commanding presence.

"Good morning, my students," the teacher greeted, rushing to place his stack of books on the desk. His feet were nimble, brisk, stubby enough for him to friction on.

"Good morning, Mr. Fusili," everyone replied, still on their seats, hauling their gigaton books.

"Today, I'll teach you the basics of clean lineart," he instantly said, not even beating around the bush, which certainly hit Bruno like a hammer on the head. Fusili's crisp voice was also quite the muffled kind, but still, he could be heard.

He scarred the chalkboard with the screaming source of snowy dust. Finally, he dropped it down, inching away to reveal a magnificent depiction of a tree. An eloquent, realistic recreation at that.

“This here, as you may know it, is a tree—a cherry blossom one,” Fusilli detailed.

Bruno admired the sight. While it wasn’t a one-to-one copy of any reference image, it definitely replicated the look well enough and it’s at least stylized. Besides, he appreciated the tree species by itself, so the charming image was just a bonus to his eyes. What made it even more impressive was that it was made purely by chalk. Thankfully, Fusilli’s whole job is to explain how he created such a masterpiece. The secret formula to his success.

When the young boy glanced around the class, he found that he was far from the only one impressed—everyone else was.

“Now, I’ll show you how I managed to get the lineart precisely pop,” he said. With those words, the teacher reeled the chalk back to him and continued to refine his art. “As you may see… I’m adding what looks to be more shading, but actually, I’m just making it thicker in some areas.”

Fusilli turned back, pausing his process to glare at his pupils. “Children, you should copy my drawing to your paper.”

They nodded, soon either ripping sheets from their blank notebooks or simply towing a random note themselves. Then, as their teacher had ordered, they started to clone what he did, including Bruno. Their heads won’t stop ducking up and down, attempting to be faithful to the art while their teacher continued to draw until finally, he huffed and dropped the chalk.

“That is what you call some fine lineart!” he declared, backing away from the board, presenting the tree like it’s a renaissance piece.

“So, I know you may wonder: How did I do it?” Fusilli imitated, pulling a fake frown, then grinning. “Well, it’s using the technique of giving the lines a bit of dimension. This can be done by what I was doing: Shading over some of the lines. Personally, I just doodle over where the light source of the art isn’t facing, like in here, the Sun is above the tree, so my bolder lines are underneath everything.”

After, he began to embolden other parts of the artwork. “There’s also line weight. The width of the lines can have priority, to emphasize what’s important so the eyes can digest the piece better,” the man explained further, not even looking at the students.

For all this time, the youngsters continued to just copy what he’s doing. And during all this, Bruno pondered over how much chalk the teacher just wasted showing he and his classmates his immaculate drawing skills. Yeah, he may be bestowing it upon others, but he could’ve used a piece of paper like everyone else.

Nevertheless, the prince tingled in the knowledge that the teacher could be circulating around the room… And he was! When Bruno lifted his head, he could clearly see that, starting with Sid and Craig, then hovering over to Carly and Sarah, until…

“Well, you must be the new kid!” Fusilli chuckled. But the laughter didn’t comfort the boy. It was the opposite; he was intimidated. Frozen, he couldn’t even doodle anymore.

“I am,” Bruno confirmed swiftly.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you! Although I’m not here for pleasantries,” said Fusilli. Dwindling from delight to amused as he ducked down to view the paper, he stammered while having a bluffing fit of laughter. “Th-that’s… Interesting.”

Upon staring down, Bruno noticed how hideous his drawing was. It was a meager tree with overly extended branches jutting out of it. The

leaves were the only redeeming factor with how detailed their midribs and veins are, although it only made the rest of it worse as it contrasted the rest of the doodle harshly. He flinched as he caught sight, trying not to be affected by the cut onions. "*Mother*," he muttered, blushing.

"It's ok. You can improve," Fusilli assured.

The boy continued to shiver, however. He knew he could draw better. Heck, he may even consider himself to be an artist if he put his heart into it rather than following his nebulous ambitions. Nonetheless, he faked a smile. "Thanks, sir."

Proudly, Alex shoved his friend aside by pushing himself to his back, almost stumbling out of his chair. The distance between them was short, thankfully, as the tables were connected only by an inch border. His sheet hovered over Bruno's unkempt hair like an unruly sign.

"How is *my* work?" Alex smirked.

Fusilli glazed his eyes on it. "It's interesting. It speaks… Something."

When Bruno got to examine it, he saw it was vibrant by the outlines alone… Of course—Alex had colored pens! As for the piece itself, it did seem a lot closer to what's presented on the board, at least better than anything Bruno did. It's not like it wasn't mediocre though.

"Thank you, Mr. Fusilli," bowed the class leader, rolling his friend's eyes.

Bruno wished he could snap back and snarl something out, but he couldn't. He had to get a hold of himself before any more trouble passes—as if he already didn't get into enough of it earlier. Fusilli was still oblivious, almost as oblivious as the cooking teacher, George Baker, or Mr. Munz, was on the first day. He was a jovial man, like him, and very much so interested in the craft of the subject rather than anything objective and tangible. That was probably what made them so similar.

After those thoughts waved, Fusilli grinned, his moustache grew. “Well, I hope you improve, newcomer,” he said, after Bruno expected some humiliating comparisons. Thank goodness that didn’t happen, or else he’d completely lose his mind!

“Yeah, hopefully so,” Bruno replied, nearly sarcastic sounding.

And so, Fusilli left the scene, wandering elsewhere across the classroom. Meanwhile, Bruno stared at his partner’s artwork, who was simply staring at it, having a dopey grin, not even giving a single eye back. He knew that if he spoke up, Alex would give him a condescending lecture followed by vain bragging about himself. After all, he was apathetic enough to fully state how it’d be crazy if they were friends, which, arguably, they could be this point.

Bruno was numb. Dour. Purely glum. His eyes dangled. The shadows above it advanced downwards as he tilted down. He was wishing to repine but had to hold himself back. Stretched his furrow was, all he could do was narrow his gloomy sight.

Finally, his friend turned his head, straightening his neck, to find Bruno’s deeply wounded expression. “Hey Bruno!” he greeted blissfully.

The boy gleamed as he assumed that Alex would have a change of heart. However…

“I can finally say that I’m not only good in Math,” he chortled. Despite his cheery tone, it broke down the pitiful young man in front of him. His soul left him, sadly enough. “But art as well, apparently! I thought I was terrible at it, but hey! You know what they say: Practice makes perfect!”

Bruno scoffed. “That’s true,” he mumbled, folding his arms in a faint hiss of rage. The leader continued to hold his cocky smile, rubbing it in the newcomer’s face.

“Next thing we know, I’ll be a cooking champion!” The jokes poured it, yet no one-liners affected the mind of the one sitting opposite the one talking.

Bruno was on the brink of murmuring more words to himself. It seems his restraints were too tough though. What makes matters worse was that Alex, his supposed “friend,” proceeded to speak as if he was a ghost. Like his obvious feelings weren’t valid. That was the salt on the wound for poor Bruno. Perhaps he was *too* petty… Was he?

Still, he could hear the ramblings of Alex, but it was all white noise by then. Hollow. Just another addition to the ocean of muted conversations in the mere surroundings. There were clouds in his ears, it seemed.

Suddenly, a sentence turned as clear as newly cleaned windows. “Hey, are you awake?” Alex asked.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t fall asleep,” assured Bruno.

Alex scorned. “I wasn’t worried, it’s just that Mr. Fusilli is close to teaching us again.”

The boy in blue groaned again, though it sounded more akin to a growling wolf. “*Of course you weren’t worried*,” he messily blathered to himself. The strange spluttering awed the leader in a wilted manner. “Pardon?” he politely prompted, jutting towards his partner’s chest, which made him slide away intentionally.

Bruno had a flashing blink before a snigger. “You heard nothing,” he lied.

Alex returned to his normal seat and as soon as the two were about to chat again, they heard a wail from the teacher, causing them to turn their attention to him, their eyes being spotlights along with those of their peers.

“I’m asking you: Where’s Renard!?” Fusilli urged.

Maximillian slammed his metallic fists on the table, attempting to prop his whole body up, but ended up dropping instantly. His gritty harmony ran across the whole classroom like a wild symphony. “I don’t know, Mr. Fusilli, I swear to Mother!” he proclaimed.

“How? Renard has been your best friend since I’ve known the both of you. He couldn’t have just played hooky—”

“How can he play hooky? Bruno did just last period, but he was kicked out so easily,” Max argued. “I know Renard is cunning and all. I mean, he can shapeshift for crying out loud!” Indeed, it was true. The missing student is a known magician and can change forms like his parents. Naturally, he’d frequently use those abilities. “But trust me: If he’s trying to escape classes, I’d know about it and I’d happily tell you.”

Fusilli raised an eyebrow. “Would you really betray your friend like that?” he posed as a frankly valid question.

“I am but a person, sir. I may experience human emotions, have equal or further intelligence than an average human teenager, interpret and construct ideas on my own, and form genuine connections with others, but you cannot deny that it’s not in my nature to care. All I was created for was to serve and be living proof of a concept that may become prevalent in the future,” Max explained in his usual monotone vocals.

Bruno shivered in that thought. Max did seem like a real person, but at the end of the day, he was still not human and never will truly equal to being one. He began to ponder what he would do if he was in his spot. Not being real, created for some ambitious purpose.

Nonetheless, there was a situation going on, and his words can’t keep on distracting everyone.

“I see,” Fusilli whispered.

“Will you believe me now, teacher?” Max asked.

The art teacher held his gaze at the bit of artificial intelligence, a mockery of what a person is. What he is. What everyone else in the place is. Yet, he grinned and nodded. “Yes,” he said.

“I’m sick of everyone asking me,” wallowed Max. “I get why: Renard is my partner and I am built to know everything, but in actuality, I *don’t* know everything. Why else was I admitted to school? I was programmed to have a hint of obliviousness—and my friend’s whereabouts is one of them.”

Fusilli coughed. “I understand your frustrations, Max. I apologize.”

“It is fine. I am going to keep getting asked anyways,” Max snarled.

Bruno had a bothered stare, which directed at Alex soon after the robot stopped speaking. His friend returned the curious look, seemingly less appalled, just amused.

Fusilli bounded ahead to the teacher’s desk, where he dropped himself to the chair. His arms rested on the bark table as he paced his view around the classroom.

“Well, all your art is amazing! Dare I say, better than the other classes! Even though I’ve only been to Class 3,” he said.

That last statement certainly didn’t impress any of the students, nor did it lift them up. If anything, they were truly displeased.

“I know you may be expecting me to try to fix your art, but really: There is no such thing as good or bad art. Art depends on the eye of the beholder,” the man explained. “If you can say a piece of art is good or bad, then that should mean a food you hate shouldn’t be edible to anyone. I find that kind of ridiculous.” He paused and scratched his cheek. “Don’t you agree?”

Everyone exchanged glances with their seat partner, as if it was some group activity being assigned to them in secret. Once they returned their thoughtful gazes, they all nodded at the teacher.

"All that matters to me is that you enjoy it, and you improve on it. That's my priority and my second goal is my job as a teacher," Fusilli went on.

Bruno couldn't deny that adding rules to something that should be a warm hobby did add pressure and stress by a tenfold. Following the words of the adult in front of him could help in the long run. Upon looking at his classmates, they seem to agree as well while they were examining their sheets of paper again. Doodles and scribbles now meant something, which flushed his woeful heart.

Suddenly, during the tender moment, someone crashed into the classroom without a single warning. They had an aching, urgent look to them. It was no one other than Garcia Berry, the homeroom teacher who was there two periods ago. Once she was a placid woman, now strung out.

Her wail was of a banging kind. A boom from her vocal cords. "Where's Renard Fox!?" She sounded like a mother crying for their missing child at a store.

The students' heads were all angled at her, as was Fusilli. At the same time, Max slammed himself on his table, a clear faceplant out of irritation.

"We don't know. Sorry," Carly scornfully stated.

Garcia grunted over her dismissive daughter. She avoided looking at Max, knowing he had already been fussed enough. Instead, she directed it at Bruno and Alex, the ones in charge. "Do *you* know?" she inquired.

"Didn't you mark him as absent earlier?" Alex asked quickly.

Garcia fidgeted her fingers and grinded her teeth. Her eyes darted downwards then returned to the king. “I *did*, but the principal called me to his office earlier… He said that he did see Renard coming to school but not at the assembly, so he was concerned and turned to me as the class teacher. I said I knew nothing… Now… He’s, well…” She paused as she dipped her head.

“What is it?” Bruno questioned.

She lifted herself again, gulping. “He assumed Renard would be gone for a bit… He didn’t come back, I can tell. So, if he didn’t return, then he advised me to start a search for him… With you all.”

The class was covered in ice, their eyes shrunk. Another investigation, again! The first day was entirely about finding their missing sparring teachers, Bruce and Jackie. Now a classmate is nowhere to be seen, only on the second day of the school year. That must be a record, and a horrific one.

Nonetheless, they seemed equally determined to scout for Renard as much as they were eager for Bruce and Jackie, fortunately enough.

Once they thawed, they shook themselves and wore pertinacious faces. “Alright, miss. We will,” Alex declared, being the voice of the whole class as they collectively nodded. Perhaps the harrowing first day did emblaze them to the point where they were hungry for more mystery-solving.

“Thank you,” Garcia grinned, her paranoid expression mellowing. “You were all great in trying to find the sparring teachers. You can bring that effort again for your classmate now!”

There was a deep, roaring bit of passion flaming out of her, mixed with trust. She gave her last look at Fusilli, a fellow teacher, then dashed out of the scene.

As soon as she left, there was an abundance of scattered murmurs across the classroom. It was definitely regarding what their homeroom teacher said, the mission they were thrusted into. There was a blurred line on their opinions about what was going on as they were both excited and steady about the search, but also anxious and doubtful of what they were doing was impulsive or not.

When Bruno glanced at Alex, he seemed to be doubtful. His eyes glazing with wonder—possibly about if he did the right thing. Even earlier, Alex argued about finding Renard after Turner suggested it. Perhaps now he wanted to appease his homeroom teacher or give up being in the dark about his subject.

Fusilli, unlike everyone else there, was relaxed and borderline joyous. His legs were still rested on the desk, no worries lingering on him other than the safety of Renard.

"It'll be alright, everyone," assured Fusilli, muting everyone. "Finding Renard will be worth it. He's too young to get hurt, after all."

"I guess you're right," Alex said. "We *have* found the sparring teachers, like Mrs. Berry said."

Alex halted more of his talking to glance around the class, possibly concerned about his sudden acceptance of the mission that the others might've challenged with. However, nobody seemed to visibly oppose him, so he continued. "Overall, it'll probably be successful."

There were mutterings of agreement from his subjects circling him.

"I think Aster and Blossom should help too! They helped you two leaders with the mystery, right?" Fusilli obliviously said, which stunned Bruno and his partner. The body language alerted the art teacher. "What's wrong?"

“We’re on… Complicated terms with those two,” Bruno slowly whispered with a cough.

Fusilli blinked, then chuckled. “Alright, it’s just some advice. Your classmates can help, of course!” Certainly was more reassuring to hear that rather than working with his bully and said bully’s lackey who may be changing their mind about him.

Bruno and Alex stared at each other, soon smiling, giving nods that indicate they’re ready, even if their peers aren’t. For a split second, the former did feel an urge to seek Blossom too despite being ambivalent about it earlier. It was a debilitating feeling.

Chapter 6

Search For A Classmate

A couple minutes later, the bell jittered into a rhythm. Indeed, it was the end of the lesson and Fusilli had to leave. Without any more words, he walked away, trailing the class behind and shutting the door with the pure force of his palms against it.

Murmurs still whirled through the room. Bruno stared at Alex, his mind leaning towards him for any advice, any wise words.

"What do you think we *should* do, Alex?" he asked.

Alex jittered, now slowly locking his neck towards Bruno. His eyes scrolled sluggishly. "Well, try to find Renard," he answered, his lips slightly moving.

Bruno blinked. His hazel gaze met that of his friend's chocolate one. "You seemed reluctant when—"

"*Garcia* requested us to do so," Alex interjected. "Turner may be my teacher too, but he isn't the one I'm supposed to respect the most."

Scornful, his partner had a subtle scowl. He quite fancied the history man so it did offend him, but it's not like he could express it without offending his leader more than he was. Besides, something else was hanging over his head like a lightbulb looming above him.

"How about Aster and Blossom?"

Alex immediately had a screeching grunt that was of a provoked wild animal. Then he held himself together with his palms laying on his table. "We'll try to work by ourselves and with our classmates. We don't need those hooligans' help."

If Bruno was a cat, his ears would've flattened, for he was admittedly desperate to see Blossom again. He did take a liking to her

since they were trapped in the basement on the first day. That time shouldn't be wasted, should it? Nevertheless, he couldn't help himself from flinching upon hearing those venomous words. Having the immense impulse to belt the sentences out, yet he couldn't.

Then Alex's eyes searched around the room. "Actually, I think we should excuse ourselves for the investigation," he proposed which definitely stunned Bruno. The boy would never expect the class king himself to be suggesting such a thing, yet here they are.

"Should we tell our classmates?" Bruno asked.

Alex sighed, his volume now decreasing, "I don't want to interrupt their education any further. That already happened last time, I'd rather not have that happen again."

Bruno dipped his head. "Understood," he affirmed.

Soon, the genius laid his chain on his skeletal hand. "We could start working it out alone together. We already did so well when we tried to find Aster and Blossom last time. Renard may be a bit of a troublemaker, but he isn't as much of a devil as them."

Jostling his feet, Bruno swallowed. "I don't know… Last time was a long time and… well…" He choked even further when remembering what Alex told him during the search; saying that Bruno was delusional for thinking they could be friends.

"Do you really want to work with those two rabble-rousers? They bullied you! Don't you understand?!" protested Alex.

"Of course I do!" hissed Bruno. "Do you really think I don't?" He laid himself calmly on the chair after that faint argument. "Blossom just seemed different to me. It looked like she changed. I mean, she was the last person I spoke to before I went back home."

"Bruno, not everyone can change on a whim," Alex spat quickly.

But that made Bruno scoff further. On a spark, he pulled out a torn old book from his scarlet bag, gripping it tightly, presenting it like it's a piece of art. "How about this? It's proof, Alex!"

Alex gasped. His head swiveled around the classroom before targeting the book. "How did you find that?" he whispered, leaning closer to his partner.

"I found this while me and *Blossom* were talking next to the bus stop, before my dad surprisingly came to pick me up," he explained.

Strangely enough, Alex's jaws dropped, staring deeply into the collection of pages, nested inside the matted leather. His eyes were mere dots. He started to shudder, audibly as well. "A-And she didn't s-say anything about it?"

Bruno shook his head, starting to level the book down to his lap. "She did say it could be cursed though and that it's not a good idea to keep it. Honestly, I still think she was kind of weird for saying that."

Upon giving a thorough look at Alex, the boy in blue realized that maybe what he was saying was wrong. "Bruno, you should've listened to her. That *book*…" More cold shivering could he felt off him. How strange. Still, Bruno had rolled his eyes and made a subtle "tch" sound out of the curl of his lips. "Good grief, Alex, it's not like I don't know what I'm doing," he said as he narrowed his eyes.

"Did you write anything in it?" the leader suddenly asked.

"I *did*, actually," Bruno confessed, proudly showing off the single page he jotted down on, widely opening his lined sheets. Alex scanned it, his mouth still gaping into a cave. There were bits of tiny muttering heard, but the words were too hushed.

Sharply and unexpectedly, Bruno shut the book, leading Alex to stay upright instead of bending down to read. It seemed his look was perpetually perplexed. "You and the others have been acting *too* weird."

After the statement, Bruno shrugged. “Oh well. I guess this is what I get for wanting to move to Manhattan."

When Bruno opened his eyes after joking, he found that Alex awkwardly snickered, playing along.

“Come on. Don’t you think we should start going?” he asked, turning eager all of a sudden.

“Bruno, we should be waiting for the teacher to come… Who should be Mr. Quaver,” he said. Quaver was the music teacher, also working with his assistant, Louise, who was actually an alumnus some of the students personally met back then.

However, the young man sniggered, flailing his head around before getting into a standstill as it directed to Alex. “We can just tell our classmates to tell him.”

Alex fidgeted his fingers and sniffled. The posture was quite a contrast to his more enthusiastic partner. He stayed quiet while Bruno heightened his voice further, “We got to do this!” It was clear that he had a deep longing to see Blossom and possibly see what could happen if they were going to get together like she wanted. With that knowledge, Alex’s once meek expression turned cold and unamused, especially after a demeaning groan. “Fine,” he reluctantly accepted.

The leader was the first to stand up, straightening his back to the fullest. His eyes scrolled across the classroom like a robot scanning anything foreign. Finally, he cleared his throat to speak up, which woke everyone up and channeled their attention to him.

“My friends,” he started with a mighty voice. “me and Bruno will set off to investigate.”

Mutterings came about instantly. Sheldon was the only voice to be replying. “Why don’t we come with you?”

“I’m sorry, but we believe it’s best if we do the dirty work instead of all of us. I don’t want you to hurt your education because of this situation,” Alex explained.

More murmurs sprouted which tensed Alex and Bruno, the latter of whom was rising from his seat. He whispered closely to him, “See? We should’ve brought in our classmates.”

After the pressure mixed from Bruno’s repeated proposal and the intimidating mumbling from his subjects, Alex caved in and sighed, his face plastered with bitterness. “Alright, alright, you can come. Let me just inform a teacher first—”

And just as soon as he said that, the door slammed open to reveal Louise stomping in, followed by the shorter Quaver. Unlike his assistant, Quaver continued to stand at the entrance, although he did close the gate in. His look was painful to the classroom, even causing Bruno and Alex to sit down again.

“What is going on here?” Quaver asked, nearly hissing.

Alex shivered, much more than Bruno ever could in this situation.

“Mr. Octavia, we must go and find someone,” Alex explained sheepishly. Quaver’s eyes turned into slits as he stares deeper at the star student, his sight searing, drilling into not only Alex’s, but Bruno’s skull too.

“*Again*?” retorted Quaver. “Well, that’s just—” He bowed for a couple of minutes, showing only his shadow, then he rose, standing up straight like an untattered twig, and beamed. “Incredible!”

“R-Really?” Bruno stammered. He glanced at the entire class to confirm that he’s not crazy for being stunned, and he really wasn’t. Even Louise seemed stumped, frozen in his flinch.

Quaver inched closer to his desk until he finally reached it, leaning his arms on it. “Really. You’re such brave and fine students for being determined to find Renard, your own classmate.”

They collectively blinked. “How did you know?” Maverick rasped.

Quaver chortled, snorting. “Teacher’s gossip, of course!” he explained as if it was super obvious.

“Does that mean—”

“Yes!” the music teacher interjected in a cheer. “You can go and find your little classmate.” Suddenly, he itched his chin, grinning while everyone was getting from their seats. The ones from the back began to approach the front of the class, getting face-to-face with the mustached man and his young assistant who was still paralyzed. “He was one of my favorites too, Renard. A troublemaker but has passion for music.”

For a second, Bruno noticed Connor, who was the closest to Quaver, gloomily turning wilted, slouching down as if he heard an offensive word thrown around. Casper, his friend, was simply curious about the backstory going on. That’s natural seeing as he’s the second newest student, behind Bruno himself.

Alex stood up suddenly, then gestured with the lift of his hands. “Bruno, come on. We’re allowed to go,” he encouraged. As he rose from his seat and started to exit along with his classmates, he heard subtle whispering from Craig. He said, “Thank you, Ludwig.” Quaver bowed at the same time as him, like they were royalty towards each other. “No problem,” he replied.

They were trotting across the floor, crowding together to the middle of the hallway, scanning the area with their lazer eyes. Alex was the first to speak up with his bold voice that was covered in a lisp.

“Let’s split up. Renard could be anywhere, maybe even right under our noses,” Alex said, bringing everyone’s attention to him, all of them facing their king now. Once scattered, now attracted to him as magnets. Alex’s head snapped towards each student he was calling out. “Maverick, Spencer, Sheldon, Sid, Craig, go to Class 1. Carly, Sarah, Bella, Roselynn and Maximillian, go to Class 3. And the rest of you get to Class 4.”

They nodded in unison and dispersed, though Bruno was left awkwardly alone. “What about us, Alex?” he asked meekly.

There was tight hesitation in his friend’s eyes. His head heaved high heavily from drooping before levelling with Bruno. He was only an inch shorter than him, yet he was still so menacing. “I know I said that we shouldn’t really be seeking Aster and Blossom, but…”

Bruno squeaked as he gasped, breathing in all the sorrowful air that his friend was emanating. “You—”

“Shush!” Alex spat. His eyes darted left to right before getting centered. “This situation… It’s getting quite tense, I must admit. Renard may be in genuine danger.”

“Of course he is!” retorted Bruno.

Alex snarled. “But don’t get too excited!” He soon breathed. “We’ll contact them later. For now, we’re going to check on our classmates. Let’s start with Class 1 so you don’t make any googly eyes with those two.”

The normal boy huffed, offended, but obliged anyways as he followed Alex to the classroom of the said group. And indeed, he again returned to Class 1 in the same day he sneaked in. Things will certainly be awkward. Alas, this was needed. There’s a lot at stake and clinging onto the memory won’t make things better.

As the powerful boys creaked the door open, they found Mr. Albert standing in front of everyone. However, he wasn’t the man in charge here, or the one talking. Instead, it was the self-assured crowd of Maverick,

Spencer, Sheldon, Sid and Craig speaking to an argumentative class which piqued the interest of the boys barging in. They peeked towards Albert first as his pupils swung to meet theirs. Staying as a statue, though, only his eyes were seen moving—definitely not creepy at all.

When Bruno fully gazed over the room, he found the familiar faces that he saw roughly an hour ago once more. While they reminded him of the best detention he had, now they're an agonizing symbol of an embarrassing period. The only person who seemed to have noticed him (and not even Alex) was Blue, as told by her face lighting up as much as the sun and her eager, warm stare at the newcomer. Bruno was so distracted by her sight, he wasn't paying attention to the speech at all until…

"There you are!" Spencer exclaimed. They were finally noticed as everyone faced them. "Tell them, Alex," he continued to screech.

Encouraged, Alex inched closer and closer to the middle and ahead of everyone before he halted and glared at everyone equally. The gruff face worn made him all the more imposing, striking Bruno the most. A pang of his darkest memories held about the leader shocked him.

"Students of Class 1, listen!" Alex called in a blaring shout, catching all the kids. "I get that you're a bit tense after my class prince snuck into your class, but believe us, one of us is in danger!"

"That isn't the problem, Alex. We could care less about what Bruno does. He's still in my favor, even if he did embarrass me," Ryder admitted, somehow shamelessly and bravely, which did cause some admiration from the class prince. "It's just that we really know nothing about Renard's disappearance."

Sheldon roared, having the pride and edge of a lion. "Liars!" he accused. Riley padded over his friend, finishing his words with his deeper

voice. “It’s obvious they know something! They just don’t want to share it because—” Sheldon spluttered, “Because they hate us, that’s why!”

The Class 1 members collectively rolled their eyes except for Ryder and Blue who both appeared to be conflicted… And strangely another hidden student too, way in the back. Their smugness that they were rumored to infamously have finally rubbed off on Bruno, thinning his eyes. He wished he could quarrel back, though he had to hold himself off.

“Says you guys, *Class 1 traitors*.” Those words were from Candace, a girl he recognized from the detention class as particularly hating a plant the biology teacher, Mr. McRyan, brought. She was also one of Claire’s friends that he saw in the break. Her disgust had transferred to her blistering sentence here. “Yeah, you *had* to just leave our class and cozy up to our rivals!” another girl, Pearl, spat with her friend behind her.

There were more protests from across the classroom, invading both ears of the Class 2 students. Riley and Sheldon were shivering, squirming in their past. Now Bruno knew of their past, and it didn’t seem so pretty. The class they were assigned to—it was their former one! Whether Alex knew what he was doing or not, he didn’t seem to care as told by his ruthless eyes.

Soon enough, the ramblings made Ryder slam his fists on his table. “Enough, everyone!” he screamed, causing everyone to look at him. Finally, he ascended from his seat and marched to the front, standing side to side with Alex. “We must listen to the Class 2 students! One of their peers has gone missing. While it may not be your duty to help anyone and everyone in need, it is mine’s. Understand that, at least.”

The students exchanged curious glances, then bobbed to their president who was shining their eyes in pride.

Riley and Sheldon approached him, their faces now warmer than ever. “Thank you, Ryder, old friend,” Riley thanked. Sheldon lit up. “Yeah.”

The students growled, especially some of the girls. “Of course you’d try to stand up for your good friends, Ryder,” Claire grunted. Bruno has a freezing sensation when he could feel his ex glaring at him. It had struck him like swift lightning.

“For your information, Claire, Ryder is trying to do his job,” Alex snorted, his arms now folded in frustration. “Maybe you could’ve spoken out if you won the vote.”

Claire screeched, though there were no words, just pure angst and rage seething out of her. Her face was that of a pricked snake, and so was her heart, at least to Bruno.

Ignoring everyone, the Class 1 leader inched to Alex’s ear and had a faint whisper, although Bruno could hear it well as he was just as close to his friend. “Look, Alex, we really know *nothing* about Renard.”

But soon after he said that, he froze, as if he only heard himself speaking now. Stricken by the memory, he spoke up softly. “Oh! I may be wrong…” he slightly admitted. Suddenly, his head steadily shifted to view a particular student to his left hand side.

When Bruno traced the sight, he found that he was directing towards a boy in lavender-shrouded clothing. A deep plum t-shirt with a lighter shaded star. Headphones of the same color were bent down to his neck. His hair was freakily like Aster’s, and with the matching color scheme, it was no wonder finding him jumped Bruno for a bit. Even his coal pants with flagrant pockets matched that of his bully. The only difference was this boy’s sky eyes.

“Harley?” muttered Alex.

“Harley, you said that you saw Renard at Central Park last night, was that right?” Ryder interrogated.

After shuddering, Harley swallowed and said, “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Do you know what could’ve happened to him?” the leader went on. Despite the mild tone of his voice, Harley continued to jitter, his eyes swinging around the classroom. “No, I don’t.”

Before Bruno and Alex were going to sigh in disappointment and disbelief, the boy continued. “But I saw him with someone peculiar!”

Alex gasped quietly. “Go on,” he prompted.

“Tadashi Suzuki,” Harley grimaced.

While Bruno was lost, he glanced at his classmates to find that they were nonchalant. Shrugging and murmuring to each other unlike the other kids around. Even Albert, who was simply watching in amusement, turned interested like he was watching a movie’s climax unfold.

“Renard used to be close to Tadashi,” told Alex.

“Yes, but it is strange that Tadashi was the last person he was seen with, isn’t it? I believe that the guy must’ve been involved,” suspected Ryder. His fellow leader gazed at him, intrigued at that theory, although it was sort of obvious too, at least to Bruno.

Alex gave one pleading look to his prince before darting back to Ryder. “ I suppose you’re right,” he breathed.

“You can go and ask the Class 4 members for Tadashi’s whereabouts. I know the guy would have *some* information,” Ryder suggested.

Alex nodded. “Understood.” As he said that, his subjects squirmed a glare at him, some of them curling in their posture. At a snap, Alex stared at his classmates. He ordered, “You heard him. Head off to Class 4, or back to the room.”

“Affirmative,” they collectively said as they saluted. And together, they set off, dashing straight out of the light door, leaving Bruno and Alex as the lone Class 2 members in the room. The former had a puppy-like wince to Alex as his eyes shone in a pitiful manner. “What about us, again?” he asked.

But Alex didn’t answer. Instead, his sights were set on the curious math teacher that he just noticed the presence of. Meanwhile, Ryder’s footsteps could be heard as he returned to his seat. The genius shuddered.

“Searching for Renard, huh?” Albert grinned. “Good luck.”

Bruno swung his body back to find the usually stern man. He bobbed his head in certainty and gratefulness. “Thank you, Mr. Gunther.” It was quite strange of him to say such a thing, seeing as he was speaking to the teacher of his least favorite subject. Nonetheless, respect was always warranted for teachers, especially for him at that moment.

While Bruno was pleased, Alex didn’t seem to be. His feet were twitching as much as his cheeks. His glasses almost turned misty because of his breathing. When the panic was over, he bounded to the door. “Bruno, let’s go and find…” He paused to choke himself, almost tearing up. “Aster and Blossom,” he continued in a more muted tone, as if he was shameful of saying their names.

“Finally! Ok!” Bruno responded. Although he was overjoyed, he couldn’t stop bearing to wonder why Alex suddenly turned a new leaf. Perhaps it’s because Class 3 and 4 are the next steps to the investigation, or it’s because they’re supposed to interrogate the Class 4 students regarding Tadashi. Alex appeared to be resigned to everything, after all. Resigned to Bruno’s interest in Aster and Blossom especially.

Still, they continued on to the path outside, trailing everyone in class behind. Bruno could hear every last whisper, every last dirty

murmur, from the students before the door finally shut them up. He knew full well it was about him and Alex and the peculiar mystery going on.

When Bruno and Alex reached where the Class 9 rooms should be, who were all to the sound, they found the random papers plastered on the bulletin boards were located. The roofs were still barely lit. The lockers were as gloomy as the daunting atmosphere, only brightened by the many stickers the girls would insert. The tiles as hollow as how Bruno was following, being a lot. Only lines that were straight akin to his plain ways.

Once they reached the middle of the floor, where there was a straight path to the stairways, Bruno belted out a burning question that scalded his brain. “By the way, who’s Tadashi?” he asked.

Alex sighed, as if the thought of that student weighed on him. “Tadashi was a student here before moving schools. I think his parents were concerned about the safety of the school? I don’t remember, but he’s basically not here anymore. Back when Renard was a member of Class 4, he used to be close to the boy, so it was no surprise that he was going out to see his good friend. Still, Tadashi should be having some information.”

“Obviously,” Bruno snickered. His smile turned into a soft frown. “But how would Aster and Blossom know anything? We should be asking the Class 4 students.”

Alex halted his steps, followed by Bruno, as the two exchanged looks. “Aster and Blossom are some of the students who have been here for the longest. I am too. We’ve been here since the earliest stage of kindergarten! Unlike everyone else who joined either the next year or in first grade, and all the ones before? They all left as soon as actual school came around” the leader explained. “If I don’t know something about the school, then they should.” Soon after saying that though, he had a hard scoff. “Oh, but that’s not really why I’m trying to find them.” As he

reminded himself of his inner mission, he continued marching to the stairs, causing his vice leader to trail behind him. “I want to… Make a deal with them. This is the opportune time to,” murmured Alex.

Bruno’s mind was scrambled. “*Deal*?” he muttered to himself. Deal probably translates to coercion to him, especially with a class king saying this. At least he’s attempting to change their ways.

“Yes, a deal,” Alex affirmed. “If you want Aster and Blossom to keep bullying you, then fine, we can turn back—”

“No, no, it’s fine! I was just curious,” Bruno insisted.

Alex had a dim, scornful look before advancing further than the ordinary boy, who sighed soon after.

Once they reached the stairs to the second floor, they immediately heard something fascinating ringing in their ears. It was the cries of sixth grade children, mixed with the laughter of diabolical teenagers. No… Not any diabolical teenagers. It was…

Chapter 7

Deal's A Deal

"Aster and Blossom?" Bruno muttered.

Alex instantly shut the young boy's mouth with the fling of his arm. There was more larky laughter, hysterical enough to temper Alex and tempt Bruno into speaking up. Yet, they still stay frozen, silently watching over a crime being committed.

Aster and Blossom were indeed there with all their troublesome energy. They were snatching the backpack of a kid, but not any—it was someone who looked sort of like the one in purple. The sixth grader had the same foreboding inky hair as Aster, though more gelled and flattened down. Somehow, he was even shorter and thinner than who was bullying him.

"What's the matter, Benny? Can't stand up?" Aster taunted as he lifted the brown backpack up, followed by Blossom continuing to giggle. "Is your cousin too much for you?"

The babyish imitation of his voice cracked Alex to the point where he snapped. "Enough!" he roared as he launched from the end of the steps to the corridor where he saw the bullies towering over the laid down kid. Bruno soon proceeded to arrive too.

Aster hissed. "Here comes the fun police." Surprisingly, he could still hold the bag high above his angular hair. His best friend, on the other hand, gulped, then flinched and inched backwards. Her rose gaze met that of Bruno's brown, both of whom were distressed. Suddenly, Aster slammed the bag to Blossom's face, who then held it to her chest.

"What were you doing!?" Alex screamed.

"I was just teaching my cousin a lesson, that's all," snarked Aster.

But Alex didn't seem to buy it. He sluggishly slid his neck down to view him, finding how pathetic he appeared to be. All he was doing was whimpering and sticking to the ground. After heaving his head, Alex glared at main tormentor. "What lesson does he need to learn?" he coldly asked, expecting no answer other than a sarcastic one.

"That he needs to respect me, of course!" Aster sniggered. "Isn't that right, Benjamin?"

Ben went on to meekly warble though. It seemed his vocal cords were obliterated, somehow. The silent response made his cousin groan in fury, but no words were followed. Just his pure rage.

"Enough of all this, Aster!" Alex called out.

"Do you really think you'll get me to listen to you?"

"I have the authority and I'm a favorite student of many teachers, so you can't argue with me." The leader had the last words as Aster continued to stay quiet, albeit still furious.

After the agonizing silence, Alex bent down to lift Ben up, who was still cowering in raw fear. "Blossom, hand me the backpack, *now*," the leader ordered.

Shuddering, Blossom shakily gave him the bag. As soon as that exchange happened, Alex lent it back to the rightful owner, Ben who brightened up only by a bit. Bruno also experienced that strange warmth in his guts that he never felt with Alex. Even Blossom began to smirk, a contrast to her deeply grimacing friend.

Joyfully, Ben skipped to his class, clumsily taking the backpack with him, now fading away into the mere distance from the teens.

Bruno marinated in the bliss before Alex snarled, waking up everyone from the trance of watching the sixth grader get away. It was banging, a

blast in their ears, amplified by the blaring howl of the boy's lisp. His tongue twisting as he yelled, getting everyone to face him.

"Now, let's speak business!" he declared.

Blossom swallowed once more while Bruno softly moaned.

"No! Why did you come anyways? How did you know we're here?!" Aster aggressively threw as questions suddenly.

Alex grunted. "I and Bruno searched through the school. That's when I figured you weren't around."

Despite the reply, Bruno had to interject as he wore a concerned expression. "Well, we didn't look at Class 3 and 4, so—"

In a heartbeat, Alex snapped his neck to stare at his class prince, having a throbbing look which stabbed Bruno. "*I* figured it out, not you!" Although the sudden glare did stun him, the boy in blue immediately groaned. Deep down, he thought to himself how Alex is definitely using this as an opportunity to make himself look better than him.

Nonetheless, Blossom's mouth formed an "O" in a flurry of curiosity and horror. Aster, too, was irritated and mortified. "That's crazy," the girl murmured, probably to her partner-in-crime.

"Look, I'm not here to humor you two. I'll stop beating around the bush," Alex grimaced. He began to slowly circle on the troublemakers, leaving Bruno out of it. "What's up with Tadashi?"

That caused Blossom to jerk even further and Aster grinding his sharp teeth. "Tadashi?" he flintily asked, eventuated by a scoff. "Do you really think we know anything?"

"Don't kid me, guys," scowled Alex, trying to cuff his raised voice. "Aster, you used to know Tadashi! And Blossom, you do too."

"I did, yeah," Blossom confirmed.

"Why are you asking this?" Aster went on, ignoring what the leader was saying, focused on being stand-offish towards him.

“Renard has gone missing, if you haven’t heard. We caught wind that the last person he saw was that crummy Japanese boy,” Alex curled his lips as he said. “Since he was the last person to see him, we believe that we could solve the case if we ask him. The thing is: We don’t even know where he is.”

Aster dipped his head at the same time Blossom’s feet quivered. “I see,” the former breathed. Then the two exchanged mild glances. “We do know which school he ended up in,” Blossom answered as their eyes returned to the Class 2 members.

“Really? Where?” Alex asked, turning interested.

Aster coughed, his face tense by a memory. “St. Williams,” he said. That caused Alex to twitch and jump. “That old school?” Everyone but Bruno appeared to think this is preposterous which definitely confused him. Luckily, Blossom answered it, reading his mind. “We couldn’t believe it too! He said that he wanted to avoid this school because of all the corruption issues, when that one is worse!”

So that was the issue: Corruption. Not like it wasn’t plaguing the entirety of the nation anyways. If Tadashi was so bothered, he might as well have taken a plane to Polynesia since it’s basically all over the globe by now. Either way, St. Williams certainly wasn’t a favorable school if even the bullies and the ill-hearted class leader thought less of it.

Blossom held herself together after ranting about where he went. “That’s not the only thing we know,” she said.

“Yup. He’s living somewhere close to the Voyants,” Aster added.

Alex nodded, directing his nose to Bruno who was as lost as a tourist. “Excuse me?” the prince muttered. Despite the confusion, Alex ignored it and patted his arm, then gesturing to his bag. “Note it down,” he whispered.

Ignoring his perplexion, Bruno pulled out a random notepad he left in his huge scarlet bag, then he jotted down the words he just heard.

"I heard from my classmates that Tadashi has an illness, but I don't know which," Aster went on and that caused Bruno to write again, but it caused Alex to light up.

"Maybe he infected Renard with it," he thought out loud.

"No clue," Aster said. "For all I know, it could just be rumors spreading. I wasn't even his classmate when he left."

Alex hacked. "That's true." His head swung from Bruno to Aster at a drop of a hat. "Well, anything more?" he asked.

Aster and Blossom's pupils darted to each other, frozen. Suddenly, it drifted back to the boys as they shook their heads. Staying still with his note at hand, Bruno had a calm expression, a contrast to his leader's aggressive infuriated one. "Really?" he snarled.

"Forgive us, Alex. We don't know Tadashi much either," Blossom apologized with her voice lower than usual.

"What she said!" Aster said. "And it was really only Renard and a couple of my oldest classmates who would know anything. I bet Craig doesn't either despite being a Class 4 member from the start. Yeah, he was always couped up with those *teacher's pets*."

Alex patiently nodded the whole time, but Bruno could tell that he was close to exploding in frustration. "Looks like we have to ask the Class 4 students, my prince," addressed the boy to his second-in-command, who dropped the notepad back to his bag, predicting that he would say that.

Suddenly, Alex jittered in remembering something. "Right, I almost forgot!" he exclaimed, causing the others to jump. Bruno could even tell that Aster and Blossom were shifting their gears to walk away, without even declaring it. That was stopped by the leader speaking up, of course.

“What is it, *king Alex*?” scorned Aster, especially in the end.

The leader smirked in such a smug manner, his teeth were shining brightly straight into the others’ eyes despite the corridor lights being so dull. “I’ve got a deal to make,” he announced.

As Bruno glanced at the bullies, he could watch how much they were shivering. Aster was clenching his teeth, grinding it, while Blossom angled her feet towards each other. Even he admittedly wasn’t feeling too well about the impending moment.

“If you help us with this investigation, then I’ll not tell anyone about what you’ve been doing until we solve the case,” Alex offered. “What do you say? Deal?”

Blossom’s jaw slightly opened. She and Bruno then crossed their heads to find Aster being stumped, his eyes dilated into the size of a pea. His spiky, shadowy hair hopped for a split second. Aster suddenly asked, “What’s in it for you?” Alex sneered back. “I want you to stop causing trouble.” The bullies leered at each other, finally concluding on Alex’s cocky face who brashly extended his arm for a handshake. Aster hesitated at it but then pushed himself to reciprocate it.

“Deal,” he accepted boldly. That caused Bruno and Blossom to gasp and arch both their eyebrows.

After they let go of each other’s palms, Alex grinned with disdain, appearing to have won that once uphill battle of changing the hooligans’ minds. Although, yet again, Aster didn’t seem so content or confident, Bruno could tell he was a bit intimidated. Of course, he would be reading too deeply into his expressions as well.

“Good,” Alex beamed smugly. “Now, return to your classes. The next period should start soon.”

There was an odd tension in the air. Bruno watched as Aster narrowed his slate eyes straight at Alex, ignoring even Blossom who was cowering beside him. Perhaps the deal isn't truly off, not on the inside, no. Yet, the commitment was still there, and what was said was said, the handshake was done, nobody can argue with that.

A sinking feeling in Bruno's heart now turned it heavy. The weight of it increasing as every pound of it drummed. Finally, he realized it signaled the sounds of a door whining open. And not from any place, it was from Class 3 of the sixth grade to the right-hand side of him. The others noticed too, collectively flinching.

"Hide!" Alex ordered in a whisper.

Instantly, they ran to the area where the stairs are. It was a straight line, only covered by a wall to protect students from falling. Behind it now are the four meddling teenagers, sheltered from the principal whose eloquent footsteps were soon heard.

Ever the curious, Bruno peeked from the side, only to find the man swinging his head side to side, then advancing to Class 1 of the seventh grade. Soon enough, they pricked the yells from the gangly stringent man.

While it might've been inaudible to the others, the normal boy caught it as clearly as glass. It was him scolding them for half of the class sneaking out to get ice cream intended for the first graders. "Yikes," Bruno whispered. "We better get back." His grim furrow ventilating it all.

They stayed still, probably paralyzed at the perpetual chastising until the class's door banged close. When Bruno peeped out once more, he found that getting inside that room heated the principal up so much, his cheeks were tomatoes, a steaming one at that.

As hilarious as it was, he had to hold his laughter. The moment he turned back to view his peers; he urged them with the point of his index finger. "Guys, come on, we have to go!"

Once they heard the principal producing more noise from his increasingly aggressive steps, they scampered to the third floor, where they're supposed to be. Muffled sounds of the Class 2 students bargaining in the rooms could be heard, much less faint than before.

Bruno turned his head back, only to see nobody following them. His breaths were shallow and rapid, unlike the others who were standing solidly and emotionlessly.

"What happened?" Blossom asked as she wandered closer to her own classroom, although not by a lot. That made Bruno glance back to her along with the others. "I sent my classmates to ask around for the investigation," said Alex.

Aster had a searing scowl. "Seriously?"

"Your leaders won't mind. They'll understand," Alex assured.

Bruno, who was a bit farther than his leader, soon approached him. His deep brown eyes met that of Alex's hazel. "We should really get back to class, before the principal finds us!" he urgently suggested.

"You're right, my prince. I'll call the rest of our classmates. You can return to our room," Alex told him.

Bruno swallowed, slightly tilting his head. There was a blinding shine in his eyes, soft enough to reflect on Alex, though he grimaced instead of reciprocating the mildness. "Don't look at me like that," he snapped. "I know what you want to do… *Don't*" He rounded him. "Trust me. Blossom won't accept you."

"*Excuse me*?" Blossom snarled.

After the girl slowly got closer to Alex, the leader gritted his teeth while Aster backed away, folding his arms. "Are you choosing your own prince's friends?" she asked, close to roaring. Alex's eyes darted down, not saying anything, probably in shame, though it really didn't look like

it. He just appeared to be speechless. “Let him talk to me all he wants. I think he does know what he’s doing.”

That caused Bruno to gently grin, which Blossom noticed as she smiled back as she tilted her head to see him. Alex, meanwhile, groaned. “*Whatever*,” he spat. Immediately, he twisted to face his prince. “Just get back to class, *now*.” The command forced Bruno to march to the front, aiming to the left, passing all the Grade 9 classes to the side. “And don’t any of you think this is anything but professional!” Alex went on as the newcomer sluggishly trotted away. While he didn’t see the king speaking out, Bruno could feel the angst boiling inside of his leader, now spreading to him as his face cringed.

As he was leaving the scene, he could hear Aster and Blossom exiting too. The footsteps that could belong to Alex seemed to be leading to somewhere that isn’t a class. Once Bruno swung his head, he found Aster turning the same direction as he was, which made sense since Class 2 and 4 were located in the same corner of Floor 3, right in front of the angled windows. There was a bit of agitation in his heart as he knew Aster as an enemy. It was intimidating.

Once he returned to class properly, he found how empty and hollow the walls were. There was absolutely nothing but the boards full of motivational posters and tables that had the remains of what his classmates left behind. He sighed as if he returned from a party where everyone got drunk and he was the only one sober. The cold shoulder from the air made him only feel gritter.

He bounded closer to his seat. As soon as he reached it, he dropped down and instantly felt empty to his bones. His skin crawling in the absence of everyone. For some strange reason though, it was comforting. Now he’s all alone, a privilege he’ll never get in the future. There was a

sense of clarity in his simple mind but also dread looming over him. No Nadia and Isabella bantering with each other, no bickering Carly and Sarah, no Maverick and Mandy making dad jokes, and most notably, no Alex staring at him. It's just him and his soul stuck together. The one person he would be ashamed of being alone with is who he's facing now.

To distract himself, he gazed around the barren room, creeped out by the messages being told all over the walls. Then he found the oddities that were the spots of his peers. A mix of light-hearted and strange, there was everything.

However, as soon as his eyes laid over Renard's seat, he found something under his table… He stood up slightly to make it out, getting it to angle to his seers. Finally, he could see it, dotting a shadowed sheet of paper, sleeping on the icy floor. Before he could get up though, the paper flied away, the breeze catching it, sliding the window open to escape.

That caused Bruno's jaws to drop down. The sudden motion of it was certainly what shocked him the most. And it appeared to be so unnatural too, like there was some ghost or supernatural power out there controlling it. Nonetheless, he stayed still on his chair.

"What the—?" Bruno muttered to himself, swaying his head around. "How?" His eyes dashed across his sclera from left to right, checking if anyone was secretly there to propel it. Alas, there was nobody, though he should be thankful that he wasn't in any peril.

"Could it be Renard?" he murmured further out loud. "But he can't turn invisible, can he?" Sadly, he knew next to nothing about shapeshifters, so it's not like he could answer that burning question. But if it was Renard, there should be more signals and signs that he would be there. Bruno soon chalked this up to a ghost that this school is rumored to have. Looks like this was his first encounter with one. How eerie. Even amplified so by his loneliness.

Chapter 8

Friends?

After some time alone, Bruno heard the door creaking open. There, he finally saw not only some of his classmates barging in, but everybody, including Alex. It was a surprise how they managed to squeeze through the thin gate.

As they were all chattering and babbling, there were the screams of the bell vibrating through the air. Of course, they returned because the period had ended. It was a surprise they weren't kicked out of the classes or were caught sooner.

Nonetheless, Bruno felt oddly comforted, a feeling he never expected to experience considering how noisy his classmates are. He sighed as soon as he spotted the first few enters, those being Mandy and Maverick who appeared to be rushing in.

When Alex bound towards his seat, Bruno raised his head, following where his friend was. As he sat, the blue boy inquired, "What happened?"

"I just told them to stop asking around," Alex answered. "We'll continue the investigation tomorrow. I want to quit wasting time anyways."

Wasting time for Bruno here just meant skipping class, and that was a gift for everyone. Alex was really the only person in the room who wanted to study. Otherwise, the rest of the kids there simply wanted to spend time with each other and be at home, or better yet, doing something genuinely productive like solving mysteries. Still, there was a thought hanging over his brown head, one lingering about Renard and his safety.

Hopefully he'll return by the end of the day but considering the fact that they're drawing closer to lunch, he doubted it.

There was an itch in him too; an itch to tell Alex about the sheet under the missing student's table that magically flied away. He even stared at the window to recheck if it closed again, and it did. Sweating, the boy turned back to gaze at his friend. Alas, a chain to his heart made him withdraw. Instead, he had another question to pose. When he was swirling through the room, he found his peers pulling random objects, let it be a book, shoes or even a whole racket. Even if the answer is obvious, it was better to ask.

"Is it PE now?" he questioned.

Alex nodded. "Yeah," he affirmed. "You don't need to get ready yourself. If Maverick is right, then the coach will let us play basketball."

"That's great! I was fine at basketball back in Brooklyn," Bruno shrugged, grinning. But Alex didn't seem as gleeful as he was, his torso turned to only show his profile view. "Good for you. I'm going to walk," he silently declared.

The words made Bruno bop his head. "Oh, alright!" His friend continued to appear ashamed and anxious though for some unexplained reason. Most likely, it's due to the humiliation of having a wise class king not playing such a popular sport.

Before Bruno could speak up, their classmates started leaving the classroom, giggling and chatting, those conversations soon muffled as they distanced further from the duo until it gradually died away. Because of that, Alex stood up in a grandiose fashion, overpowering Bruno in height until he also got up. "Come on, let's go," he urged.

The two advanced to the door, Bruno lunging it to keep it open for the both of them. When he turned back, he caught Casper and Connor following them as the last two people to exit the room.

As they walked to the Grade 9 line of classes, everyone left at once, all the chatty kids gossiping about the latest phone models and recent album releases. Another interesting topic was the vice principal, which Bruno nearly had slipped his mind. Understandable seeing how he was clouded by the thoughts about Renard. One of the ninth graders he saw looked a lot like Alex, though more sunflower-shaded than having a sunset gradient to him. The intrigue plagued Bruno's mind.

Once he was going to ask, Alex spluttered as if he read his friend's mind. "That's August, my brother." He slightly pointed to the boy Bruno was staring at. "We look similar, don't we? It's because we look like our mother."

Bruno remembered the story behind his leader's mother. His father, Duke, who is also the swimming coach, cheated on her with a diabolical woman, Lila. At least diabolical from how Alex described her. The amount of pain he heard coming out of every word he said was immense when he admitted this, not only to Bruno, but in front of the whole class as he argued with Duke.

"Your mother, huh?" Bruno remarked.

"Yes. She was a beautiful woman, you know?" said Alex eagerly. "Too bad she moved back to where she was from. I only felt like it was yesterday she moved to Manhattan with us." There was a gouging desperation in his voice as present as his tender longing for better days. Those days when Bruno wasn't there, those days when he was with his true maternal figure.

Suddenly, Alex's eyes twinkled as he turned to Bruno. "Have you felt this way before?" he faintly asked. At that moment, there was a

different air to him, completely so from other times. Instead of the sharp coldness infecting him, it was a deeply wounded heart, shrouded in sorrow, the shadows of his past. Nonetheless, Bruno gazed at his good friend and grinned.

His smile was a relaxed one, so were his eye sockets. “Of course I have.” He continued to reply, “I just broke up with my oldest group of friends on the first day alone. When that happened, I became a broken person.” Every word was a vomit of poison, stuck in his stomach for the past week. “Then I met you. I felt something. The same goes to Aster and Blossom, even if they bullied me.”

“You should be feeling better off with our classmates,” Alex instantly spat. Once he did, Bruno swung his head away from his friend, shielding his vulnerability. “I don’t know, Alex,” he confessed further.

After a moment’s worth of silence, Bruno angled himself towards his leader, somehow still walking at the same sluggish pace as him. And from that, he found that, instead of the expected aggression, Alex was gentle. It was obvious by his softened face. For a heartbeat, he had a desire to express more of his thoughts. After all, there was still time to reach the gym. What is he going to lose if he admitted to more?

“I’m being silly though. There’s one person who I truly miss the most,” he said, not even looking at Alex anymore, just at the endless-patterned floor. Hoping for any words from the other boy, he drew his head upward, only to be disappointed by no prompts. So, he gulped. “I knew him from kindergarten: Moxie,” he quickly said.

Yet again, Bruno rose up, now finding that Alex had a pinch of surprise sprinkled in his expression. “Oh?” he mumbled. Bruno went on, “I don’t know if that’s his real name. He just first called himself Moxie and that’s how I always liked to call him. Left Brooklyn sometime before I got to actual school though.”

A second before Alex was going to speak, indicated by opening his jaw, they had already reached the grand gym. It was in the depths downstairs, jabbed on the first floor. When Bruno stepped in, he saw his classmates among countless other students who were already whisking away to group around the basketball court.

Suddenly, after an arrow shot his heart, he realized that the gym wasn't the same gym he even went to for sparring class on the first day. That was a spare one, meaning that this enormous one was indeed used during that time. Certainly, it was practical, and cost-saving, of the school to do this.

Wishing to spend time with Alex, he spun around. Finally, he did manage to find his good friend, though he was going to exit through the broad gate. As soon as he spotted that, he dashed that way. "Alex? Where are you going?" he yelped.

"Did you forget? I'm not playing basketball," Alex screeched, having that "are you stupid?" expression worn on him that he somehow always has. That stung Bruno, especially with his insulting body language. "Right. Sorry," the newcomer whimpered, bundling his arms to his waist.

Alex huffed then stormed away. It was a jarring contrast between him minutes ago and now.

As Alex disappeared into the wilderness of the school, Bruno watched more and more students arriving. Heavy at heart, he soon drifted off to his classmates who were crowding in the middle of the basketball field they set up.

As he approached Maverick specifically, he swallowed and asked, "Can I play?"

Maverick darted his head and instantly nodded. “Of course! There can be as many players as possible. Plus, we need more people from our grade to overpower the other seniors,” he snarked.

Spencer hissed while Mandy chortled. Even Bruno had a subtle giggle. Max soon came up to his classmates along with Sheldon, Riley, Violet, Winnie and Connor. Bruno could also find Casper sitting at a bench close to them, either as a substitute or an eager supporter. “Where’s Alex?” questioned Max.

Bruno scoffed. “Walking,” he coldly answered.

“It’s fine if he doesn’t want to play. It’s his choice,” Max insisted, “I was just asking.”

After the question, Bruno shifted his head from left to right to only be lost in thought about something. “Where are the other girls?” he inquired.

“They’re busy doing arts and craft. Basically, doing free labor for decorating the school!” Winnie chuckled. “I’m no good at doodlin’, so I’d practically be as useful as a wrench to a fixed tire!”

“Right,” Bruno snickered.

Soon enough, Bruno found the other students from the other classes who are participating in the senior’s play-off, which is the twelfth and eleventh graders against the tenth and ninth graders. While Bruno couldn’t identify those from below his year, he recognized most of those who are in his.

One approached Maverick, who Bruno recalled was from Class 3. He was with a friend, from Class 4 instead. That Class 3 student had a dim shade of brown throughout his wardrobe, topped with star shades of the same color. Meanwhile, his friend had an adorable leaf green sweater with earthy cargo pants. His scruffy yet sharp hair even covered one of his tiny, oval eyes.

“Aye, it’s the lovebirds, Mick and Larry,” Maverick instantly chuckled. “Seriously, Mick, couldn’t you have come alone?” When he was edging closer to the duo, he was closer to Mick and even slightly pointing at him. The one in brown was clearly Mick, whose cheeks had now erupted in pink. “Quit it, Mav,” he whimpered.

“Right. Business time! What is it you want?” Maverick asked.

Larry gulped, leaving Mick to speak on his own, indicated by gesturing him to go ahead. “How are we going to split into teams?”

“By two grades, *duh*,” Maverick mocked as if it’s obvious. “Those kiddos there are with us while the adults are together.”

Mick appeared to be more unimpressed and tired. His friend, on the other hand, was quivering even further. “We’re seriously going to be teamed up with fifteen children?”

Mandy shoved herself into the circle the boys somehow formed, blazing when speaking. “They’re just a *year* younger than us! Mind you, we *are* technically children ourselves.”

Once she said that, Larry gave his good friend a pleading glance, Mick returning it. He sighed as soon as he witnessed that. Swinging his head, he was hesitating before he mumbled. “Fine. I was just asking.”

“It’s fine if you don’t want to play. We’ve already got tons of teammates,” Maverick said.

Larry nimbly stammered. “N-No! W-We will play! I-I just… Feel like I’m out of my comfort zone.”

Bruno and his other classmates padded towards the scene, him being the first one to open his mouth. “It’s fine getting out of your comfort zone. And you’ll have us!”

Instead of a pleasing smile that Bruno expected as a response, Mick and Larry visibly gasped, their eyes widening. “Mother! It’s the

newcomer!" Mick exclaimed. "The one who brought back Bruce and Jackie!" Flustered, Bruno giggled. "Aww, it wasn't *only* me."

Yet Maverick wasn't having it. He pulled Bruno behind him as he was about to get closer to the two boys. "Okay, let's tell the seniors that the match will start!" he announced. There were murmurs from the other students as they began to gather around the already chatty group formed by Mick and Larry. Soon enough, cheers roared from them as the seniors approached.

"Did you say the match will start?" one asked, being in front.

"Yup! Get ready to get your butts kicked!" Maverick cheekily confirmed, having a sweetened enough voice to fool some of the players into thinking he was complimenting them. Another challenged him, the other one also ahead of everyone. "It's on!" he proclaimed daringly.

In a storm of more chants, the ninth graders all screamed, "LET'S GO JUNIORS!" Frankly, it was a bit humiliating to Bruno's year as they were closer to the seniors than they ever were.

As everyone took their places, Bruno noticed those who aren't playing are now grouping around the borders of the field, watching the match even if they're occupied with drawing or enthralled in a conversation. He could even spot some people possibly playing as substitutes, including some members of Team Toxic and many others he was familiar with.

When Bruno searched for anyone he knew around his side of the field, he surprisingly found Aster, someone not the expected height for this sport. Well, *anything's possible*, he assumed.

Before he knew it, a whistle blew from the referee, Jeffery, who was there the whole time in the middle to Bruno's right, across the door. And as soon as that hissing sound was heard, everyone began to act, just at the snap of a finger.

Everyone was shuffling around the field, the lines turning blurry every moment someone was moving. A flash here, a flash there. Seconds meant nothing, instead it was all so rapid. Every bit of a ball passing, all the bangs of the ball hitting the ground from someone pounding it with their hand. The squeaks of their shoes as they cause friction on the sparkling floor was the icing on top of the full basketball atmosphere he was looking forward to.

Bruno finally managed to get hold of his first ball. He dashed through multiple seniors, most being taller than him somehow, going to the end to the left of the entrance. One was brown-haired, another had icy eyes. The student closest to the hoop shot down the ball, slapping it on the ground, bouncing off to a ninth year student who raised it up, backed away but then cowardly threw it to another player, one of Bruno's grade. The one who held the ball jolted a bit and then threw it, going through the hoop. Howls of cheering commenced, mostly from the ninth graders.

When Bruno rushed to look, he saw that it was Clyde, a bulky, vibrant blonde boy, a member of Class 4 that he briefly saw in the assembly earlier that day. Everyone from his grade gave him a great high-five, including Bruno. "Good work, Clyde!" complimented Maverick. In a sudden deep and unexpected voice, Clyde replied, "Thank you, dude."

They continued to play soon after. The rest of the match was fairly monotonous, more than Bruno had figured. The blaze basketball kept being thrown from one player to another, from grade to grade by accident. There were surprisingly some commendable scores from both the juniors and seniors. The most astonishing win was funnily enough, from Aster.

The short boy took hold of the ball somehow. With his agile feet, he managed to escape the towering seniors, all not even being able to see him due to his height. He passed it to Winnie, but then she was cornered, returning it to Aster, who had reached near the hoop. Suddenly, he tossed

the ball up with reckless abandon. That had a reward as it was a score! There was a huge celebration afterwards, Aster gasping at that, dumbfounded by what he had done. “Dang!” he exclaimed. “I just got us a point.” He definitely was most stunned by the fact that he was low-lying.

Eventually, Bruno had enough of the game. Losing track of time, he just picked a random moment to declare his temporary resignation from the match. After his eyes scouting for Maverick, he soon found him.

“Maverick!” Bruno called as he padded towards him. His classmate didn’t say anything, just a quick moan as he turned back to view him. “Can I take a break?”

“Of course. You might’ve not scored, but you’re playing well,” Maverick told him.

That made Bruno beam once he walked away.

He approached the other students who were relaxing and supporting their respective teams. Specifically, he padded towards his classmates, all mingling with members of the rest of the classes.

Carly and Sarah sneered at him, “Well, looks like sports wore you off.” Thankfully, Bella scorned, “Oh, quit it, ladies.” Roselynn and Nadia snickered, the latter forming dreamy eyes soon after.

As soon as Bruno noticed his admirer’s pupils turning flirty, he swung his head away swiftly to the remaining boys, Craig and Sid, who appeared to have come up to Casper as he was left alone earlier. Spencer strangely was absent though. “Hi boys! Where’s Spencer?” Bruno asked.

“He’s out walking,” Craig answered, his vocals as raspy as usual.

“You played great! Not as amazing as Maverick, but still better than me,” chuckled Casper, humility worn on him like makeup. Bruno half-expected Sid to speak, yet he didn’t. All he did was just blankly stare at

the newcomer, seemingly dumbfounded, although he looks like that all the time.

Eventually, Bruno sat with them, all in the line of seats that resemble bleachers but not really. The boys were in the same row as the girls but fairly spaced out.

They were all closely observing once they continued playing. Bruno's eyes were especially kept on Aster, interested in what the short man's next move is going to be. Whether his score was a fluke like his expression would suggest, or perhaps he was too humble to admit that he was incredible at the sport.

All moving and shuffling at breakneck speeds, somehow dodging each other, passing balls like it's a quick game of hot potato, it kept everyone at their inquisitive toes. Their looks collectively shift from one player to player at a rapid pace, so much so that Bruno almost got dizzy just from searching for who currently has control of the amber ball.

One throw to another. Running with the constantly bouncing object and then finally, after shoving a few blocking people… BAM!

"LET'S GO!" a student from across roared while everyone roared in a cheer. When Bruno tilted, he found that it was Kevin, a member of Team Toxic, with the other members of his group also braying. It seems like Aster was the only one playing currently.

Suddenly, Craig subtly hit Bruno's shoulder with his own, gaining his attention. "Maverick's really making it rain over there," grinned the strange classmate. That made Bruno cackle. "I know! He's the MVP!" he exclaimed.

Students kept dribbling the ball, greedily keeping it to themselves. After a while, Bruno heaved above to catch all the twelfth and eleventh graders scowling at their fellow seniors, probably because they're losing.

Then, out of the blue, there was a thud that came to Bruno's right. It turned out to be Blossom when he swirled around.

Gasping, Bruno said, "Blossom! I thought you were with your friends over there." He tried not to point to Team Toxic as to not instigate anything.

"I know," she chortled as she swayed her feet around. "But I've got a better view of Aster here." After, she blinked cutely. "Your classmates won't mind, right?" Her question sounded like begging.

Bruno's head swiveled from left to right, returning to Blossom later. "Uh… I don't think so." He noted that everyone seemed oblivious, and if they did, nobody had called them out. Blossom had a wide grin. "Good," she gleamed, "I've been meaning to spend more time with you."

"But what about—"

"Alex isn't here," Blossom whispered as she shushed Bruno with her finger. "And Aster's too focused on the game to notice." Lifting her finger, she wore that warm smile again while Bruno's stomach spawned butterflies that clicked around him, revealing that it's the brisk beating of his burning heart. Even he was getting physically close to her by the way he was sitting. "It's too bad it's against the rules of the class system… Getting together with someone from another class."

The girl definitely made a massive jump. Just the last day Bruno saw her, she was up to taunting him with her best friend as some lame lackey. Now she's into him. Nonetheless, Bruno flushed red, his head slowly dipping. "I know it is… I don't understand that," he said.

"Me neither," Blossom replied. "But at least we can see each other at a time like this, right?"

"That's true," chuckled Bruno awkwardly.

Blossom sighed, having a visible pang of longing. "That's why me and Aster got to our classes," she stated. The sudden statement caused

Bruno to flinch. “You mean, you weren’t originally in Class 3, and he wasn’t from Class 4?” For a heartbeat, he did sharply recall how Alex subtly mentioned to him how the pair swapped classes… This is what he meant.

At that, Blossom shook her head profusely and woefully. “We used to be in Class 1, like the rest of Team Toxic. But then we caused a huge ruckus in the campus and, well, that got us split up. Everyone knew putting us together would mean trouble, but we found it fun. I suppose I get their perspective though,” she explained. Abruptly, Blossom had a scalding grimace. “Only if that psychic jerk didn’t rat us out though.”

“Psychic jerk?” Bruno naively asked in an instant.

Blossom’s neck, which used to face the field, now twisted to Bruno. “You’ll know in a later time,” she insisted.

After that, the pair continued to watch the match, now silent. It was an odd moment. Once a lustful second, now fading into stillness. Bruno had hoped that the conversation would bloom into one that would connect them. Sadly, it just ended untimely. Yet, during the whole quiet staring contest with the field, Bruno sensed a bit of tenderness in his guts. The yearning for something between him and this new person who wants to get in his life. Even if his mind tells him otherwise, his heart would love to spend time with someone other than Alex for the rest of the school year. Better yet, maybe he can even bring Alex back together with his estranged friend. That was probably only for a dream though.

Every tick of the clock, Bruno expected Blossom to speak up. Fire a conversation, attempt to get to know him. There was nothing though which was disappointing. Silence could only last so long, however.

“You know, Bruno, if Aster decided to be a little nicer from the start, you’ll see he isn’t so bad,” Blossom said.

Bruno snickered. “Really? Aster? Nice? Don’t make me laugh.”

“I’m serious. He’s a good guy… Once you get to know him,” she warmly stated at the end. The affection oozing out of her voice bothered Bruno, who was experiencing a hint of jealousy for some reason he can’t explain. “I remember when I met him the first time. It was during lunch in third grade, I’m sure. I was all alone, eating by myself. You see, I had some… experiences back in first grade. I went to this super posh private school. I was pretty much picked on though and my parents didn’t want to pay so much for me, so they got me here again. I had a lot of baggage for second grade.”

“I know how that feels. I just came back from a terrible school myself,” Bruno responded at a snap of a finger. His mouth really belted it out. “That’s why I got into this school, really. My parents got concerned over me getting constantly bullied for two years straight, so they decided that it was for the better that I end up here.”

Blossom smirked. “That’s sort of how it went for me!” The two gazed at each other, meeting their vibrant eyes and then giggled over their similarities. Even blushing a little. “Anyways. We met during lunch and he approached me. Yes, *he* approached *me*! Crazy to know that now, right?”

Hesitantly, Bruno nodded. Looks like Blossom, too, knows how cruel Aster is now, though it was obvious that she always somewhat acknowledged it. “The two of us started talking and we clicked. It was totally awesome! I never had that sort of instant connection with anyone else after him,” she said, bewildered. One of Bruno’s eyebrows arched.

“Not even Team Toxic?”

The girl circled her head. “Not really,” she admitted. After lifting herself to continue watching the match, she went on without looking at her newfound friend. “Aster…” she whispered, gently. “He’s such a weird Filipino.” That smile was followed by a faint chortle.

Bruno coughed as he stared at the side of her face. “Filipino?” he prompted. Still, she wasn’t looking at him, only focusing on Aster. “Yup.” After the affirmation, her head levelled down to Bruno again. “You do know he’s an immigrant, right?”

Obviously, Bruno didn’t. His jaws dropped, obviously indicating to his good friend that he was unaware of it, which stunned her into gulping. “Oh,” she muttered. “Ok…” Swiftly after, Bruno hissed, “Was he seriously bullying me for my accent when he’s literally an immigrant? He’s less American than I am and he had the *audacity* to say that!?”

Before Bruno went too far with his words, Blossom gripped to his shoulder. “Oh, hush! Don’t be a hypocrite to a hypocrite,” she snapped.

Suddenly, a new opponent had arrived: Aster. The duo noticed as soon as his iconic shoes clapped to the thick concrete floor. His hair even was drizzled from the immense sweat he had. Somehow, he retired from the match and they didn’t even know, which definitely led them in for a shock.

Instantly, he sneered, “Who are you calling a hypocrite!?”

“Nobody,” Blossom blurted out.

Bruno had a deep glare at her, but she didn’t reciprocate it.

When Aster gave the newcomer a threatening glance, Bruno cowered, shivering in his freezing eyes. While he seemed like he was going to harm him, Aster actually didn’t. Instead, he resorted to walking in front of the blue boy and then dropped his body on the seat next to his best friend.

The befriended boy and girl pair gave him a perplexed look which caused him to sigh. “Alex told me we’re supposed to be partners, and the deal is probably going to break if I hurt you,” Aster confessed.

In a fit of relief, Bruno sighed, finally calmly smiling.

“I can’t believe you’re trying to get together with him though, out of everyone in this school—!”

“Let me choose whoever I want to date! You’re not my dad.”

“Not like I care about that. I’m just telling you; Bruno’s a bit too…” Aster scoffed, too caught up in arguing with his close friend to even think straight, as well as being shuffled in the mental storm of the game. “Average to be a rad boyfriend.”

Bruno jerked at that final word. “B-Boyfriend?” he stammered.

That made Blossom blush as much as he was. “You did *not* hear that,” she denied to her longtime friend. Aster groaned in raw rage as they were showing their hidden affection for each other. “This is so stupid,” he mumbled.

At that moment, Bruno realized that Aster shared the same lust for her. His cheeks were red as his eyes were flailing around the sclera, only staring at the ground in order to not even look at his best friend smiling at someone new.

“You do know it’s even against the rules of—"

To cause an even larger wrench in possible dating plans though, and to pause Aster, Alex jogged into the scene, his white shoes clamping on the floor to the best of their abilities, tears of his skin emanating throughout his whole body. But it wasn’t the run that was bothering him.

His face was crumpled at the sight of Bruno with his two bullies. There were clear wrinkles formed around his forehead as his eyebrows clenched to his eye sockets

“Excuse me, Mr. Ray? What are you doing with *them*?” he asked.

Bruno groaned. “Here we go again…” He raged with a roar. “You know, you said earlier today that it’s fine if I get together with Blossom.

You even trusted me enough to do whatever I wanted. Now what!? Tell me!"

But Alex continued to scowl. "You're not being a good role model."

"That's not a good argument. Doesn't even have anything to do with what I said," Bruno retorted. "Just admit it. You just want me to only be with you, even if you hate me for some weird reason."

"I don't hate you. When did I say that?" Alex said as he gaped his mouth, flabbergasted.

The newcomer didn't answer, only showing him that sick, cold glare that his leader would always give him. He was even sitting on the ground, too bothered to stand up.

Finally, Blossom spoke up, "Don't blame him, Alex. It's all me. You too, Aster. You got to remember that! Bruno never approached me."

Aster moaned, flipping his head. "You're supposed to *hate* him."

"I don't get you two," Blossom scorned back instantly.

"This *love* that you want is forbidden, Blossom—!"

But Alex groaned, evidently had enough, and exploded, though as quietly as he could. "Get out of here, now, and frolic back to your pretty friends," he ordered. "The next time we talk should be the investigation tomorrow."

Aster stood up, followed by Blossom with the pull of his tight hand. "Alright," he snarled. The two went out, with the girl's closest thing to goodbye being her dejected expression, wishing Bruno to follow them instead of his leader. But he couldn't, not in this world at least.

As Bruno expected, Alex roared further. "Don't do something stupid like that again!"

"You said—" Bruno scoffed at himself, facepalming. "Never mind," he snapped. Obviously, his arguments meant nothing in the eyes

of his leader. As beneficial as being adamant is, it can really turn against anyone speaking to him.

Miraculously, Alex defaulted back to the version that Bruno always knew him as. The wise and mystical boy. That happened after he sighed and descended to the seat, beginning to watch the match, not even ignoring Bruno by giving glances at him. That certainly stumped Bruno but he was glad there were no further conflicts between them.

Chapter 9

Soulsider

Once the school day ended, everyone returned home, as expected. Feasts were had with plentiful plates of food. Leisure time was cherished and, of course, time for sleep had bound to arrive, and it eventually did as the skies turned out to be dim enough.

Despite that, as the city that never sleeps, New York was still active. Lights spurred around the regions, honking cars roaring to move along and people continually crossing streets, locals and tourists alike. Away from the iconic bustling roads though were the modest suburbs, only lit by the lamps.

Bruno was one of the people to live in these cozy homes. He rushed to bed due to being insanely tired. Once he jumped on his bed and laid his blanket over him, he instantly dozed off to dreamland.

Unfortunately for him, it wasn't dreamland. Instead, every atom in front of him was drenched in black. Like ink was covering his vision. He shuddered.

"Not this again…" he whispered to himself as he attempted to walk to the best of his efforts. All he could avoid doing was tripping on his feet. If he did, then he could imagine himself falling down the void till the end of time.

There was truly nothing in front of him. No numb mind could've conjured it, not even his scrambled mental state that remained from the moment Alex and Aster rejected him to him pondering over the fate of Renard.

And as he thought about those two and Blossom, there was finally an environment around him, one tangible enough for him to feel a smidge

familiar. It was a forest, though in the middle of the night. While it's expected to cause a sensation of fear, it just brought comfort to Bruno because it isn't the pure darkness lurking behind and ahead of him.

"Phew," he huffed to himself.

Advancing through the millions of trees, he could sometimes catch some of the iconic skyscrapers of Manhattan looming over him, the most obvious being the Empire State Building. Although it may seem like the normal New York City he knows, it isn't. Yes, there are a bunch of trees in the city, mainly in the center, but not this much. It's edging towards uncountable for its amount.

"Is anyone here?" he called. A sensation of uneasiness crawled through him.

Suddenly, a voice could be heard. "Bruno!" It sounded like a call for help! Without hesitation, he ran towards it as he heard some peculiar noises from the distance. There was no way he could identify it, but it was off. Even the call was familiar. Then it puzzled in his brain: It was the collective screams of Alex, Aster and Blossom. "Guys, I'm coming!" he reassuringly called. As he navigated through, he half-expected a recreation of the investigation of the first day. After all, his dreams for the past few days since the school closed was about them.

Once he reached the scene though, his heart plummeted as his body did to the ground.

There were the limp bodies of his peers. All bundled together. No motion present at all, only the deep stares from them, their pupils shrunk. But what made Bruno terrified the most were their twitching muscles while they bled. Despite the pools of blood, they weren't truly wounded, only wounded in their stomachs and a couple gnashes on their arms and head. The grass slowly turned red at every tick of the clock though, emphasizing how gone they were.

Bruno trembled in the frozen air, smelling the thick scent of death. Lightning struck through every nerve under his cowering skin. Breathing heavily, he almost couldn't catch himself any longer, only barely holding on with his swaying two feet. "N-no…" he muttered. "Oh no…"

The causes of their deaths could be anything, for some reason, he sensed specifically that of poison from the hollow soul of Alex, burning from the remaining soot from Blossom and Aster was definitely falling or just a simple blunt murder for he was the bloodiest and had his back broken.

Somehow, by some supernatural force, his arms were propped to level with his eyes. Suddenly, his palms that were hidden now showed a torn-out heart with all its veins out, a smoky lighter and a poisoned, rotten cake. Now he could see what happened as his head inched upwards to clearly view his dead friends again…

Soon enough, he started to have some shallow breaths as it increased rapidly, as much as his heartrate did. The realization shook him. At any point, he could've had a heart attack and joined them. It had to be a dream, of course it was, but that doesn't mean it wasn't frightening. Dreams can't have meaning either, right?

"It can't be…" he murmured faintly.

After, he saw a tunnel of light forming ahead of them. Being crouched down, he had to raise his neck up to see it, and it was ghastly despite how welcoming it appeared to be. It was beaming towards him, lighting up his cheeks and brightening his eyes.

His surface-level breaths still couldn't handle the moment as he stood up to follow it. Suddenly, while he basked in the luster ahead of him, the bodied below began bending up. That's when Bruno noticed them rising like zombies. Shuddering, he whimpered, "Guys?"

Somehow, they weren't themselves. Instead, they were… Someone else. Bruno couldn't say who, it doesn't seem like he knew them, but it was a group of girls. A group familiar to him in the core of his organs. Alex wore a matted hoodie instead, Aster having extended hair and Blossom even had glasses.

"What happened to you!?" Bruno exclaimed. A gasp came out as he realized… He sounded like a girl himself. His head swung around, then he paused to feel himself. His palms touched a sweater, instead of his shirt… Weird. When he tilted down, he saw… There weren't the usual black stripes… And his brown hair grew. His heartbeat increased.

"You know what you did," they chanted into a sick rhythm.

They started to inch closer to him to the point where he backed away slowly. "I don't know what I did! Please! Leave me alone!"

The environment turned from the forest abundant of trees to pure blackness once again. But now there are his haunted friends and the shimmering light still glowing in front of him.

"PLEASE! LEAVE ME ALONE! I SWEAR I DON'T KNOW WHY DO YOU HATE ME, WHAT DID I DO!?" Bruno wallowed. His panic didn't concern the others at all; they still were trying to be ruthless.

When Alex, Aster and Blossom reached Bruno's toes, the light expanded to overtake the entire darkened environment. It's as if it engulfed them. Suddenly, it flickered, alternating between the familiar murky nothingness and the alluring white. All this time though, Bruno stared deeply at his friends who returned it in a much more menacing fashion. Finally, a voice rang clear in his ears. It was heavily distorted and raspy, not like any he had heard before.

WAKE UP AND YOU'LL SEE THE FLAMES.

Bruno darted his head back and forth. "Wh-what?" he stammered.

At that moment, his friends disappear and the flashes grew so frequent that it tampered his view into seeing only red. It caused him to wake up.

As he woke up from his bed, sitting straight with his legs laid across the sheets, he panted like he just finished a marathon, but it was no exercise. His eyes shrunk, his mouth gaped, his mind cluttered with thoughts about what just happened. A storm, a fury of emotions and theories and opinions flooded him.

Managing to ground him, however, he looked around only to find the night still going strong outside his window. After sighing, he dropped back to the pillow, collecting himself and just trying to inhale and exhale through the troubles. To finally get a good night's rest. Sadly, it was easier said than done…

A new dawn awakens, and that means it's another day of school. Strangely enough, it's only the third one overall, which was something to certainly marinate on. This meant more bus rides with Blossom, much to his wistful dismay.

As he hopped on the vehicle, Bruno trudged through the many rows of seats when he found the girl in a long skirt that was covered in flowers, being Blossom. When he arrived, the girl lifted her face with her neck to hold her gaze at him. She didn't say anything, however, only staying quiet and smiling. Bruno didn't seem to get the hint though, passing her to sit on the seat closest to the window. The moment he sat, she frowned and dipped her head.

The memory of the nightmare continued to linger in his memory. Every second he shut his eyes; he could tingle in memory of it. To drown his voices reminding him of it, he plugged some earphones to listen to a breakup song which related to the traumatizing dream for some reason.

The reflection on the window showed his sorrowful expression to Blossom who replicated it. A breath from her escaped as she began to speak up. “Are you ok?” she asked.

No response, just Bruno staring out of the window in ignorance, viewing the magnificence of Manhattan with the Empire State Building towering over everyone, including its fellow skyscrapers. It caused a pang in every fiber of his being as it reminded him of his nightmare.

“Bruno?” Blossom continued to pry.

Finally, he groaned as he turned his body back to her. “What?”

“I know Aster and Alex came in to say that we can’t be friends, or anything more than that, but I really want to be one to you,” said Blossom.

Bruno shook his head, grimacing more. “Well, in their defense, they didn’t say we can’t be *friends*. They said we can’t be *lovers*,” he corrected. That made the girl swallow and have a shaky grin. “Right,” she quietly retorted. “Well, we can be friends, can’t we?” Bruno hesitated, then smiled and nodded, turning warmer, now rubbing off on his peer. “So, tell me, what’s on your mind?”

Admittedly, even if she was his friend the whole time, Bruno wouldn’t dare to confess such a private detail as his dreams, let alone nightmares. Albeit, he would be reluctant to share almost anything about himself, even a fact as shallow and obvious as his favorite food.

Suddenly, Blossom spoke up again, now seeming like she was reading his mind. “Is it about us?” Her voice was reduced to a mere whisper. The shock caused Bruno to flinch. “Us?” he squirmed. “What do you mean by *us*?”

The bubblegum girl blinked rapidly and said, “Me, Aster and Alex.”

Bruno’s jaw widened, producing squeaky moans as it opened. Soon, he huffed, his eyebrows drawing down into a tempered expression.

“No,” snapped Bruno, immediately showing his back to her.

There were more whimpers from Blossom, pitiful ones. At this point, she was a sick pet. “I’m sorry,” she choked. “*We’re* sorry.” For the short glance Bruno gave her, he could spot her wanting to belt out something more. Perhaps secrets. She didn’t though. He finally let go of the earphones that were nearly muffling the conversation they had, only to express his pure frustration with the tension of his muscles.

“*We*?” he followed with a rough scoff, “Yeah, speak for them, why don’t ya?” His head was still away from her, yet it loosened after some time. “They’re something else to me, Blossom. I know you want to be kind to me, and I appreciate that and you are, but *they* bother me. Especially your *best friend*.”

Blossom squandered, “I get that.”

A swallow proceeded to come out of Bruno. It was the swallow of his pride. In the moment of vulnerability, he slightly swung his head to the girl, barely in tears. “Fine. I had a nasty nightmare last night,” he admitted. “It was weird.” Later, a sigh bellowed.

“That must be awful,” murmured Blossom.

“It’s more than *awful*. It’s terrifying!” Bruno started to feel strangled. “Blossom, it… It had you… And Alex… And Aster! You were all dead! I was standing over your bodies, and I-I had my… My hands.”

“Calm down. It’ll be alright,” Blossom assured. When Bruno had a good look at her, he realized how she had a face of clarity. As if she knew what he was going to say, as if they had the same dream.

Suddenly, Bruno spluttered, “It looked like I murdered you and the others in the worst ways possible.” Blossom breathed, “That’s crazy.” The boy wished he could speak more but he kept choking himself.

Soon enough, they reached the school before the conversation could even continue. It really ended in silence because of Bruno’s cuffs on himself.

Once Blossom saw it behind Bruno who was facing her the whole time, she gasped in excitement.

"We're here!" she smiled.

Bruno turned back. "Oh, we *are*."

The instant the bus door opens, the pair walked out first despite being in the middle of the vehicle. Dashing in, they finally meet Aster. While he seemed happy to see the girl, he certainly wasn't glad to find his bullying victim. He groaned and stared grimly at Blossom.

"You're seriously hanging out with him like this?" Aster snorted.

Blossom narrows her eyes and hisses, "Oh shut it!"

Feeling awkward, Bruno advanced forward, leaving Blossom and Aster behind to avoid the latter. The distraught young lady soon followed him, getting Aster to trail along as a result, though much slower than the other two.

As they were pacing through the stairs and eventually the corridors, they were ignoring everyone having their own clique chats beneath the dim lights. "Still feeling tense?" Blossom asked.

Shuddering and quietly squirming, Bruno was almost speechless. He had to force his mouth open to even speak. "How can I *not* feel tense after what I just witnessed?"

Suddenly, somehow, Aster managed to approach them quickly. Perhaps the fear of missing out lulled him into the conversation. "What *did* you witness?"

As if he already wasn't grouchy, Bruno swung his head away from the short rascal. "What do *you* want to know?" Even his tone was bitter.

"Jeez, sorry for being curious," Aster sneered.

For one last time, Bruno had a searing glare at Aster and then simply strutted away, past the duo and to his class in the corner of the floor, passing the angled walls.

Before he entered the classroom, he heard a brief back-and-forth between the two bullies. Blossom did appear to be concerned for Bruno, so it was no wonder why she wanted to be outspoken, especially after what she had expressed after all this time.

"Aster, let him calm down. He had a bad dream, that's all," she assured.

Yet, her good friend snorted further. "A bad dream? Seriously? What a wimp."

"*I'm* scared of nightmares! Am *I* a wimp?"

After Blossom had the assumedly last words, Bruno turned off his ears away from that and focused on his classmates who were all already flying paper airplanes around like it's some airport terminal. At any point, he could've gotten hit by one! Actually, he did.

As one suddenly hit him on the head, he turned to see it's a more yellowish-toned paper airplane as it plummeted to the faux wooden-textured floor. Once Bruno picked it up, he could really feel how smooth it was and certainly saw the "creases" as a decal now.

At once, he heard a call from his classmate, Maverick. He waved blissfully. Rubbing off on Bruno, he carelessly threw the plane at his peer and luckily caught it perfectly mid-air. As soon as he got it, he tossed it again but to the back of the class, landing on the shelves now.

"Maybe you should keep it there!" Mandy snickered.

"Oh, you," gaggled Maverick as he approached the site of the plane.

While more planes were being thrown in other directions, Bruno tried his best to dodge all of it and ended up at his seat where he found Alex, somehow ignoring all of it and didn't even know he came.

“Morning Alex,” he robotically greeted. One glance around the classroom was taken before speaking again. “Aren’t you going to do anything about the—”

“The planes? I can’t. I mean, you already encouraged it by returning Maverick’s,” Alex coldly stated. Bruno swallowed and awkwardly chuckled. “Right. That’s right,” he repeated.

Soon enough, after staring enough at Alex, Bruno resigned himself to his seat, now staring at the tables that bend at his right arm. For some reason he can’t explain, he started shivering. His thoughts scrambled about his leader, his new friend that he was supposed to make. It’s all numb. All static. All nothing. It was just scribbles manifested into his brain. His blank gaze at his table said it all, drying up his eyes.

Why was he so feeling so dizzy? Well, it’s because he was stuck thinking about what he was going through. Renard going missing, getting closer to Blossom, she and Aster joining in with the investigation. Oh, the last part is the worst he could think of. Imagine all the things Aster would do. The vicious mocking, Alex not caring at all. It turned into a cluster, a string of tensity cooking up in his brain. Most of all was that dreadful nightmare. Whenever he would even glance at Alex, Aster and Blossom, he thought about their gory fates in his dream. It constantly agonized him.

Amidst the hollow emotions, he pulled out a sheet of paper, then lifted his pencil case to draw out his black pen. With all his wretched feelings, he vomited it out by scribbling nonsense on it. The only sounds now ringing in his mind were the blabbers of his classmates as they started discussing something with Alex. But it meant nothing to Bruno at the moment. It was only white noise.

Suddenly, everything went silent. There was nothing in the air but more buzzing in his ears. Then there was a sensation that Alex poked

closer to him. Once Bruno turned to look, there indeed was his leader, only a pinch further from him.

"Bruno?" Alex spluttered as he tilted his head.

"What?" the boy rasped.

"Don't *you* think we should start investigating?" he asked.

Bruno blinked rapidly, only holding his brown gaze at his friend's hazel. Looking at him as if he was a stranger. "What do you mean? We're starting?" At his point, he was entirely icy and on the brink of only speaking in a sarcastic tone.

More murmurs arose surrounding him, clearly from his classmates. This amplified the moment Garcia crashed into the room and flung herself to her seat, clumsily keeping her stash of papers on her desk. As soon as she sat, the students all faced her.

"What's wrong, kids?" Garcia asked at the same time Carly barged in, half-asleep. "Can we investigate what's going on with Renard?" Spencer inquired with his silky voice.

The teacher nodded. "Sure! If you want any help, I'm free too." The last words warmed Bruno enough to make him smile, assured enough that maybe things will turn out fine. Although he was still bothered that he didn't even get to have his own input which Alex asked for. At that, he coldly tore his scribble-ridden paper apart, imagining it as Aster. The tears were loud enough to catch Alex's attention, but not enough to make him verbally react.

Instead of that, Alex stood up, creaking his chair, and announced, "Okay then! Let's all get out! I'll assign your groups."

Afterwards, everyone else rose from their seats and followed Alex out of the door, including Bruno. He turned back slightly to only find Garcia digging her nose into the papers and left her be like his peers did.

While he might be better, he can't deny that his mental state is still fairly numb.

Marching from the room, the horde of teenagers crowded around the middle of the corridor, passing from one rectangular chunk of the building to another that would lead them to the stairs. Alex was set in the middle.

"Alright everyone. Now we must split into groups. We'll not get into classes this time since all are occupied. Instead, the rooms will be checked," Alex declared. "Riley, Sheldon, Violet, Winnie and Roselynn, all of you will be checking the music room. Sid, Craig, Max, you're in for the cooking room. Connor, Casper, Spencer, examine the sparring gym. Maverick, Carly, Sarah, Isabella, Nadia, check the storage room."

After the order, everyone split up into their groups that were assigned, except for Bruno and Mandy who stood by him. "Now, Mandy told me yesterday that she wants to show us something. *Her theory*." He tried to hold back from hissing for the last two words.

Bruno stared at Mandy as if he was a stray animal, stuck on the road. His classmate didn't return any soft glare though, rather that of amusement. "Right. It's not exactly a theory, not *necessarily*, but…" She gulped as she finally gripped on Alex's searing stare. "It's an idea."

Soon enough, Mandy advanced to the stairs right in front of her, not taking a long trek there. When she turned back, she gestured the two with her head, bopping it. "Follow me," she said.

The two trailed behind her after she ordered them to, leading them downstairs, passing many steps down, descending into the ground. The trip seemed like it took forever to Bruno, which was strange because they clearly weren't going too far. He had made this trip many times. Probably because of the uneasiness, that sinking feeling in his stomach, making him believe this.

Once they passed the stairs, Mandy took a left turn out of the blue, literally. She headed towards the teacher's lounge, oddly enough. Confused, Bruno glanced at Alex, who then snapped back a frown, forcing the newcomer to continue walking, later being trailed by the leader.

The second they reached the wall perpendicular to the rooms, Mandy pressed her pair of palms on it and then circled it around into a full, complete arc each. At the same time, she was chanting strange words but ones that sounded oddly familiar to him. Bruno also noticed that her fingers were beginning to shimmer in purple, brimming with mystical energy that was even rubbed off on him to the point where the three teens' hairs were getting a zephyr over them.

As the wall began changing, Bruno's heart raced until he dropped his jaw. Indeed, it transformed into an expanding hole that was the entrance to… some place. Inside it was pure nothingness, like a black hole, but it was clear that there was something, it just wasn't lit at all. Nonetheless, surprise still overtook Bruno's mental state.

"Tada!" Mandy muttered jokingly as her arms rose grandly.

Bruno and Alex inched closer. When the former looked at his friend, he noted how even he appeared to be stunned by the sight. It seems like only Mandy knows of this place.

When Bruno glanced back at his peer, he started to speak, "That's incredible!" His eyebrow arched. "I-I didn't know there's a secret passage in the school!" He dipped his head awkwardly. "It's a passage, right?"

Mandy chortled. "Yeah! You really *are* clever."

"I thought you were joking about this… This thing… It's really true," Alex said in awe, somewhat to himself and his subject.

"I may be friends with Maverick, but I'm not as flippant as he is about everything," snorted Mandy.

As she finished her sentence, she started to stroll towards the hole, even beckoning without looking at the boys. And so they followed her like they were doing perfectly before.

Passing the punched out, thin lines of the cut-out wall, they reached the darkness that encompassed them and the environment. It was amplified once the jaw of the wall shut. The closing was so sudden because the magic ran out, filling it in the snap of a finger.

Obviously, Bruno was totally shaken by this. He was blindfolded on the first day and that traumatized him. After all, his greatest fear is the dark for a reason he can't specify. Shudders could be heard from him, his phobia emanating largely.

Luckily, Mandy lunged her right arm to her back and returned with a lamp that she didn't blaze, instead turning it on with a switch. "Fancy design, I know," she snickered once things brightened. Finally, Bruno, and Alex to an extent, were at ease. "There's no need to be worried about getting lost… Because there's only one path you can go through. You two can just follow me."

As expected, they did. Mandy puts on her own pedals and starts to drift away from the boys, causing them to pursue her steadily. The once snowy concrete-textured walls of the school now are pitch black, only having color once the lantern touched it. The floors were still somehow the same. Wooden, yet not really as it's the material of everything else surrounding it. Pure concrete, or even plastic.

The moment Bruno stopped observing the environment, he traced his eyes to his classmate. "So, do you think Renard could be here?" he asked, trying to ignore the still-shocked Alex gazed in astonishment around the place.

Mandy bopped her head joyfully, tilted her head towards her good classmate and even slowed down to level with him when walking. “Yup! That’s right,” she confirmed.

“Why?” Bruno suddenly blurted out.

Mandy hesitated and moaned, getting silent for a precious couple of seconds before speaking up again. “Only the supernatural can enter this place. Obviously. How else did I manage to get here?” she chuckled at the end. “Since Renard is a magician, I just assumed he would be here.” But then she sighed, like she’s uncertain in some manner. “But I’m not sure why would he randomly retreat here, other than maybe Tadashi convincing him to, or Tadashi getting him to do… Something that has to be done in secret.”

Her speech was haphazard to say the least. Every word sounded like they were simply tripping or being vomited out without any care. It’s almost appeared as if she was starting to doubt herself when she actually spoke out about her idea. That answers why Alex scoffed at the thought that it could be a plausible theory. But then what comes after might be another explanation.

“Well, before you ask: There is a reason why I took you here too,” she said. A huff came after, then she halted, making the others push the brakes too. “It’s not only because you’re both the most invested in figuring this out. Bruno, I want to make a confession to you that the others know. I’ve been meaning to tell you on the first day, but you’ve been so busy and I couldn’t find the time. Now I do, just face to face, with the both, or three, of us together.”

For a second, Bruno’s cheeks flushed red. Was he going to find out that another girl has a crush on him?

“Bruno, I’m…” Her pause made Bruno’s heart pump frequently until she finally spat it out. “I’m a soulsider.”

That certainly made Bruno's soul leave him while Alex sighed in relief, although the former did the same too. He was glad that there were no more people hanging over him. A question instantly got posed once he got his composure.

"Aren't soulsiders ghosts? You're not a ghost, you've clearly got a body," he pointed out.

"Soulsiders are *not* ghost. We're confused with them. Ghosts are basically souls that do not have a body. Soulsiders like me, on the other hand, are actual people who have the souls of people who once died but are now being given a second chance in life," Mandy explained like she read off a textbook.

It now made sense: Mandy housed the spirit of someone who died, not a wandering one, but it also made him question if anyone else secretly is one that he may have met.

"I get if you're confused. The media don't usually cover us a lot!" the black-pigtailed girl said. "But after I admitted that to our classmates, I've started becoming more accepting of who I am, and especially for who I was."

Alex smiled and walked over Bruno. "I was the one who suggested that she should after she told me before everyone else." While it sounded like a brag, it didn't exactly register to the newcomer whose mind was just riddled with what he was being told.

Mandy soon turned mellow, her broad smile transforming into a meek scowl. "Can't see me the same anymore? I get it," she asked mildly.

"Oh, no! It's just so sudden," Bruno giggled uncomfortably.

The assurance made his peer smile again. "I understand! You just ought to know that about me before the year goes on. I think you should know more about the rest of your classmates, you know? Just a suggestion."

Admittedly, that was what Bruno was yearning to do since he escaped Terrance that beginning day, yet his courage was too low. After all, he has only known these teens for the good of three days. Rushing any relationships would be damaging to everyone, although he technically just met Alex and Blossom in that timespan.

Nonetheless, Bruno nodded. “That’s a good idea,” he agreed and reaffirmed to himself.

“Now let’s try to find Renard!” Mandy blazingly said. Her fierce face made her move quicker than ever, dashing over the boys. Bruno and Alex followed her, trying not to twist their feet. For being the vessel of a dead soul, she sure is a swift girl. Then Bruno concluded that it could be because the weight of her secret had been lifted from the moment, she spouted those very words. Though that was *his* thoughts.

Bruno, his mind still being stuck on the topic, went on about Mandy’s spirit. “So, you said you’ve got the soul of a person, right?” His prompt caused her to nod. Too focused on the task, he supposed. “Who was that?”

“Why, Erica Smith! Innocent and sweet, she was. Unfortunately, she got killed by a Darkener. Mother, ever the merciful, decided to give her another life because she died so unfairly. Now that second chance is me!” Mandy told as if it’s an ordinary fairy tale, yet it was terrifying to Bruno. Darkeners. Such vicious and cruel people. Only the worst of the worst must worship Utter Darkness himself. Still, he grinned. “Erica is blessed to live in you, then, Mandy.” Finally, the girl turned her head to look at him while running, her smile broad. “Thanks!”

Soon enough, the girl advanced onward, furthering the distance between her and the boys. While walking, Alex stared at Bruno, as if there was more information to be told. From that look, Bruno concluded that there *was* something else going on.

“Mandy…” Bruno whispered as he ran closer to her. “Is there another reason why I’m being told… about this…?” His voice grew more uncertain every word uttered. Even Mandy didn’t seem as satisfied as she once was, the shadows lurking over her forehead before she heaved it to look at her classmate with a smile.

“I wish I could tell you, but our king here doesn’t want me to,” she answered. The king in question made a wedge between them as he came in between them. “That’s right,” Alex hissed as his glare seared into the ghost, making her sweat and smile clumsily. Bruno sighed. “Alright, whatever.” Despite seeming like he didn’t care; he actually does and padded further with them without any more words.

The silent stroll felt like it took ages, mainly because of how dull and quiet it turned into after the confession. Looks like Mandy’s main goal here was complete after all. Finally, after trudging through the endless darkness, they reached a dead end.

“Dang it. I guess Renard really isn’t here,” Mandy huffed.

Bruno gasped. “No! *Really*?”

“I mean, maybe? He could be to the other side of the school for all I know, but I don’t want to waste more time if he isn’t there,” she said.

Finding their classmate wasn’t wasting time, but Bruno supposed it was just Mandy’s perspective. She *is* dead after all, so it’s natural she was desensitized to the prospect of it. Nonetheless, the girl gave the lantern to Alex and spun to the back, following the path back out. “You two can figure this out on your own. This place doesn’t make me feel good, not after what happened with Zina,” Mandy declared upon her walk away.

Her back only showed, yet Bruno felt an air of gloom. Finally, she blended into the black as she drifted further and further. The name of Zina, meanwhile, rang in the newcomer’s head. She was the leader of his class before Alex took over. Unfortunately, the poor student died.

“Zina,” Alex rasped. “I wish I could just forget that name.”

The leader’s words were mere murmurs, but Bruno could hear it as clearly as his own inner thoughts. He wished he could ask something along the lines of, “Do you really miss her that much?” or maybe even a question relating to soulsiders. Alas, he kept quiet.

After a bit, Alex turned to Bruno, who then faced him. Alex, determined as ever, fired up as he spoke, “Come on, let’s head back!”

“What about Renard? He could be here,” said Bruno.

For a minute, Alex scampered his arms before answering haphazardly. “Look, we’re going to investigate this place again tomorrow, with Aster and Blossom. They’re too busy today.”

Bruno wanted to ask further, but continued to hold himself into a stiff position, nodding his head passively. “I’ll try to get Mandy to open this for us too,” Alex went on with a lower volume.

The pair, after their short chat, marched on out of the infinite passage and finally saw light—some actual abundant light—for once. It was a surge of relief for Bruno, which was the same for Alex, although he appeared to be more wary about the coming day. After the two would search for their fellow classmates, they began to return to the room they belong to, taking their comfortable seats. While Alex tried to relax, all Bruno could think about was about soulsiders. How maybe has a connection to them…

No! He’s just Bruno. The ordinary nobody that he always thought of himself—there’s no way he’s such a supernatural being… Right?

Either way, the people who he sought out to be friends like jewelry knows something about him that even he doesn’t know. One that is likely will be a mystery until he somehow changes their collective minds.

Chapter 10

The Writing In Blood

Before anyone knew it, the pages turned as the next day came by. The sun rises to wake everyone, although the students at Open Book School already are. At this point, however, they were close to being sleep-deprived zombies, but what students aren't?

While Bruno was walking into the campus, he was encountered by his brother, Antonio, who hadn't even gone up in school to him since the first day. Blossom, who noticed, swiftly walked away, diverting herself from the boy. It's not like they were having a conversation anyways, he supposed.

Curious by the sudden appearance, Bruno swung his head at his brother incredulously. "Antonio?" he rasped.

The eight-year-old, having darker brown, bowl-like hair, scowled at him as he tilted down his headphones. "What have you been doing?" His voice was as sharp as a saw, making Bruno flinch, stopping his walk and Antonio's. "What do you mean?" he asked, his mind shuffling to many assumptions. Perhaps Antonio has discovered a secret he didn't even know he has!

"I mean the investigations. The mysteries. My classmates have been telling lots about you and your new friends," Antonio said.

Bruno blinked. "Right. Of course you would," he murmured as he dipped slightly. Shame drenched him for some reason. Shame of what he expected him to say. "How have you been, then?" Antonio went on.

"I'm fine," Bruno said. "I'm trying to figure out where's one of my classmates right now."

Antonio straightened his indigo jacket. “You haven’t been telling dad anything? Or mom?” he asked.

“I told them… Well, about Terrance, but that’s it. I don’t think this new mystery needs me to do much,” Bruno answered. “Why do you suddenly care anyways?”

Antonio tried to avoid looking at his classmates, who were behind him as they were heading to the classroom at a turn. “I’ve just been asked… and dad have been talking more about what’s going on with you to me. I’m… Curious,” Antonio said. Despite that, there was an obvious tinge of jealousy flinted in his voice.

Bruno tried not to roll his eyes, only darting it to his top corner then back to his brother. “Also, I just can’t believe you keep forgetting about me,” Antonio sighed.

That certainly surprised the ordinary boy as he arched an eyebrow at his sibling. “Forgetting about you?” Bruno babbled, flabbergasted.

“You forgot about me on the first day. I was on the bus alone. I thought you were still at the nurse’s office!” Antonio snarled, frustrated.

Yet again, Bruno had a dry blink. “Sorry,” he muttered grimly. “Dad just came… I… I did forget.”

The admission made Antonio sigh. His head turned left to right to search for his peers, then he went towards them, but not before speaking again. “It’s fine. I just want to know.” He lifted his headphones again. “If you want me for anything, then I can help. I’d love to.”

He walked away soon enough, disappearing once he made a turn to his room. As soon as he got out of Bruno’s sight, the older brother huffed, making wind out of his mouth and he fully rolled his pupils now. “Younger brothers,” he quietly spat to himself. “Not even bringing this up to me for a week. Oh well.”

Suddenly, random footsteps could be heard descending from the stairs above while there wasn't anyone else around. Bruno jerked, believing that it was a staff member, but then it turned out to be not only one, but a handful of people he knew.

"Bruno!" The voice was familiar. Of course… It was Alex!

And it wasn't only him. Following him were Aster and Blossom, also showing themselves once they reach the ground with the leader. Alex was the first to fully advance to Bruno.

"Blossom told me you were staying down here, but I didn't believe her. I guess I should've listened to her," he said as he exchanged glances with the mentioned girl who soon levelled with him and Aster.

Bruno grinned at the chocolate-haired young lady who returned the look back, shining more than him. After awkwardly dipping his head, he spoke for once. "I'm sorry. I was talking to my brother."

"It's fine," Alex assured, his smile warmer than usual. "You do need to talk to your family time to time after all."

While the sentiment mellowed Bruno, it did the opposite to Aster, who had a scoff and didn't even say anything, only darting his pupils away, trying not to gag. Instead, it was Blossom who spoke.

"Well, that's great for you guys. Too bad I'm a single kid!" she chortled.

Alex sharply glared at her and grimaced, soon added with a remark, "Not like we care, Blossom," which definitely made Blossom wilted and droop her body. "Right now, let's focus on the task at hand," the leader went on.

"Right. Why did you come?" asked the newcomer, ignoring the saddened, tall Blossom.

At that, Alex bounded to the turn to the other classes but continued straight to where Mandy opened the wall. While he was walking, he answered Bruno without even looking at him. “To investigate, of course.”

Aster had a deep scowl worn on him as he was about to follow Alex along with Blossom. “Time to uphold our end of the deal, Bloss,” he muttered, subtly glaring at Bruno. Once they weren’t looking at him, Bruno went on to trail behind them, finally skidding to a halt the moment he reached the wall like his peers.

Staring at it, it felt like there was drying paint. Perplexed, Bruno glanced at Alex the same as Aster and Blossom. “So, uh, how are we going to enter? Mandy isn’t here. You said you’d try to get her to be with us What happened?”

Bruno’s many questions stunned Alex for a moment until he adjusted his slipping glasses, sweat causing friction to it. “Well, I remember the chant,” he answered clumsily. “Also, she’s got a lot on her plate today.” Embarrassingly, he murmured, “*Basketball practice*.”

As soon as he said that, Aster made an even louder “tch” out of his twitching lips. Ignoring that though, Alex stepped forward one more time and faced the wall directly. “Keep quiet. I must speak now,” he said, as if he was about to make a grandiose speech, even if he’s talking to a brick wall, literally.

Bruno and Blossom slightly backed away, both bracing themselves and even inching to catch a hug, yet they didn’t thanks to Aster’s piercing glares at them. Looks like his scowl transferred from targeting Alex to the sprouting pair.

Before they knew it, Alex started to mumble in gibberish. It was just like what Mandy said, strangely enough… But Bruno also realized that this was nearly the same language that was spoken by Alex himself on the first day, along with the other two people next to him. Maybe he

was going crazy though. Alex even did the same gestures as Mandy, twisting his palms, but no sparkles appeared as of now. It was delayed thanks to Aster.

"NERD!" he bellowed coldly.

Alex paused, biting his mouth as he froze. He clearly was enraged, but his face didn't even turn back to show. Still, he went on, repeating it and the gestures once again. However, Aster also carried on with his sarcastic heckling. "Nerd!" he constantly yelled in the middle of Alex's bizarre sentences.

This went on for a while until Alex finally snapped. After shaking, he swiftly and abruptly spun to view a now laughing Aster and dejected Bruno and Blossom. Alex's face was totally scarlet and his eyes were dots. "ASTER!" he roared.

At that, Aster quit his hysterical laughter to stare blankly at the boy. "Oh, what is it?" he snorted.

Alex stomped his way to the short troublemaker and shook him with his raw rage, gripping his shoulders. "Why don't *you* try to open it?!" he caterwauled while shivering in his anger.

Aster snickered, then pulled a smug smile. "Sure. It's not *that* difficult," he shrugged. After pushing Alex a certain inch, he passed the ablaze boy and now was face-to-face with the wall. His confidence and ego oozed out of him like lava out of a volcano, especially once he started to chant the same words and twisted his hand around into a corkscrew.

Finally, the hole gaped, welcoming in the teenagers, putting Bruno in awe again but not Blossom, though she was starting to smile now. It was the total opposite to Alex, being grouchy instead and snarling at the taunting Aster. Bruno and Blossom were ones who entered first, the former being weirdly at ease to see the place.

When Bruno turned back, he sighed, but his sadness was withdrawn as Blossom whispered straight into his ear. “If you’re wondering how does he know… We might or might not have snuck in here once or twice with the help of Mandy,” she murmured jokingly. That made Bruno giggle quite a bit.

So the four proceeded to pass through the newly opened wall, into the forked path. The one to the left was one Bruno was familiar with, but to the right? Not at all.

“Has anyone ever gone that way?” Bruno asked as he pointed in that direction.

As soon as he spoke those words, Alex, Aster and Blossom turned back since they were facing the familiar left. Perplexed, they glared at Bruno. Alex was the first to inch closer to him. “Well, Mandy did. I think,” he answered. “I mean, barely anyone can enter this part of the school. After all, Mandy did say only the supernatural can enter this place.”

Bruno had remembered that statement clearly. Blossom soon added clumsily, “And anyone who gets their assistance!” That caused the leader to scowl at her, then look at his prince. “Yes, that’s possible too.”

“Renard could be here, right? You even told me we’re going to investigate here!” Bruno said.

Alex blinked, followed by a searing grimace as Aster and Blossom glance curiously at him. “I did *not* say that. I said we’d look through other places.” Suddenly, he snapped, exploding after bracing himself. “Come on! That way could be dangerous!”

“We’ve been through dangerous claustrophobic places before. All four of us, together. We can go through this. It’s not even underground!” argued Bruno.

Blossom's shoulder met Alex's, catching his fussy attention. Her smile was the opposite of his expression, warm and bright, having a strong desire to stare at Bruno like she did before. "Come on. It's not going to be *so* bad," she insisted. As she spoke, she bounded towards the newcomer.

Desperate for aversity against his vice leader, Alex darted his eyes to Aster, who passed him to get closer to Blossom. The boy drenched in black had a boiling glare at the class king. "I agree," he announced boldly.

While Bruno was comforted by Aster finally on his side, he knew that it was like any other time he had a quarrel with Alex: He just had to pick the lesser of two evils! Now with an added drop of gratification from Blossom, his friend who was beginning to stray away, as a reward.

Alex stomped his foot in pure rage and groaned. "Fine," he snarled as he resigned himself to the situation. "But if you all get killed, I'll place the blame on you." Bruno guessed that he wouldn't even grieve at all for them. He thought that Alex's rambling was over, but it went on. "If we get in trouble, then I'll *still* blame you, except things will be so much worse."

Right after his scornful speech, Alex paced forward, passing the totally neutral-faced three who collectively decided to venture where he did. Soon enough, they followed him, now the only sounds being made were the echoes of their footsteps on the gravel.

Surrounding them was the pure dark void ahead of them. Thankfully, Alex drew out a flashlight he brought from his pocket and turned it on to luster the area. Still, the walls were barren and plastered in wet concrete. Bruno audibly shuddered, not even looking at Aster and Blossom, who were both behind him, only being able to see the back of his leader.

"It's colder than yesterday," Bruno shakily announced.

Alex moaned. "That's not wrong. I feel the same," he said.

Once Bruno turned back, he saw Blossom nodding and Aster just shivering in silence while walking alongside the rest of the teens.

They advanced forward, ignoring the sensations, what their bodies are telling them what's wrong. But as they went on, peculiar smells grew more apparent until they reached a certain point where they had to take a stop to fully examine it.

"That's nasty," snorted Aster as he sniffed.

Blossom sniffled like her friend. Suddenly, she flinched and finally winced. "It totally is!" she exclaimed, "Oh no!"

When Bruno and Alex stared at her, they noticed how traumatized she appeared to be. It's like she saw a ghost. Bruno assumed she did. After all, this is where he learned that Mandy is one. Perhaps they lurk here.

However, that was proven to not be the case once Blossom slowly and shakily bent her right arm down to point at something, obviously on the ground. When Bruno, Alex and Aster tilted down to look, the flashlight directed at it, putting a spotlight. Finally, that's when they see the horror in full.

Below them, straight on the floor, were litters of bones and skeletons, being rotted corpses propped to the wall like they're sitting. Blood was gushing all over the ground. Pools, flooded inches above. Red met the pale beige down. The bones, meanwhile, taunted the four now shaken children.

Alex even shivered enough to nearly drop his flashlight, but Bruno luckily managed to grip it, strangely being more puzzled than afraid. "Pain's grin," Bruno whispered as he lifted the flashlight, marinating on the structures of calcium he was towering over. He could feel the souls of the individual bones glaring up at him and his companions, begging for mercy, begging for life again like Mandy. They used to be people, just like

him. Now they're gone, and they possibly were for decades. What are they doing here? Who even were they?

What was even stranger, and what bemused Bruno, were the skeletons. There were specifically four, and they appeared to be his age. Perhaps they used to be students at this very school. Yet, unlike the bones, he couldn't feel a single tingle of a soul in there. Not the same odd presence as the other surrounding former corpses. Like they had their souls removed.

As Bruno darted his eyes across his friends, he noticed how much they were trembling. Even Alex was close to tearing up. He supposed he was a bit psychopathic for not having the same reaction as them. Still, he wanted questions to be answered.

"Guys, uhm… What…" He almost held himself back but swallowed his fear. "What happened here?" Fear dribbled his voice.

Once he asked, Alex, Aster and Blossom snapped their necks to stare at him. All around him were their intimidating pupils. "You don't need to know. Trust us," said Aster, strangely being the first to speak.

Bruno soon shivered like them. "Wait… Did people get killed in this school? Did you guys witness it?"

Alex impulsively pulled him to make direct eye contact, chest to chest. "No, but these bodies should not exist here!"

"Tch, of course not. We'll tell Principal Dunkel, won't we?" Bruno asked. The girl in a kimono-like dress bound to him as he was backing away. "Sure. Then he'll say we shouldn't have even been here. He won't care!" argued Blossom, her once high pitch voice turned lower and soft as a pillow. "Trust us. I've tried to tell him *lots* before," she added.

"That's ridiculous!" Bruno scoffed instantly. "No school at all should have *things* like…" He paused to search for words. "Like *that*!" Even pointing at the dead individuals haunted him.

Despite the protest, Alex sighed and snatched the flashlight back, the bodies being obscured again. He turned away from them and went on forward. He spoke, not even looking at them, icily saying, “There’s not much we can do anyways. We’re not necromancers.” He turned back, his face frozen as ever. That electrocuted Bruno but Blossom braced herself. “Come on. Let’s head on before we get scolded.”

When Alex carried on walking though, he could still be visibly seen shuddering. Blossom huffed and followed him without any words. Finally, Bruno was about to trail her, but then he looked behind to find Aster still staring at the bodies, oddly even when it was cloaked in black.

“Aster?” Bruno prompted.

That made Aster reset himself back to normal. He heaved his head to stare at Bruno, his face half-covered in the shadows. “What?” snarled the boy.

Bruno adjusted his hat awkwardly as his cheeks turned red in embarrassment. He almost forgot what he was about to say before luckily recollecting himself. “I know it’s a good thing that you’re bothered. I just want to—”

“Aster!” The distant voice that was calling was from Blossom.

At that instant, Aster propped himself up, standing straight like normal, like he didn’t experience this before. “Coming!” he shouted as he dashed forward to her, leaving Bruno behind. The newcomer sighed. Then, he took one final look at the decrepit and decayed bodies, somehow still seeing it slightly in the pure dark, before following his friends.

Passing the walls and trying to forget what they just witnessed, they tried to rush through everything to avoid another traumatic memory. Like in the basement, the textures around them were an endless labyrinth of

nothingness. Well, nothing but concrete and curious flooring. It was clear that this truly was inside the thick school walls.

After minutes of trotting, which felt like countless hours, Alex finally halted and it was obvious there was *something*, indicated by a harsh gasp from him. His head was angled up, making the others also look up, straight at the wall to their left. Luckily, the part they were at was a bit more spacious, so they could even back away to see. And it was essential they could, because what they saw had to be believed. “What the?” Bruno nearly interjected.

If the bodies weren’t already stunning them enough, they stared blankly at the wall. What was on it was writing, the writing in blood:

HIS BODY IS TAKEN. NO MORE WILL HE BE HIMSELF. NOW HE WILL BE GREATER. NO LONGER WILL HE FOLLOW THE CHOSEN FOUR.

As the four spotted that, they jerked and froze. Collectively, they shook their heads, not only in their tremble, but not in denial. “RENARD IS DEAD!?” they screeched to each other.

Instantly, Alex snapped his mouth shut, then spoke again. “Ok! Let’s not jump to conclusions. Let’s think about th—”

“My pal, we literally saw skeletons there!” Bruno protested.

Aster oddly was the one to snarl though. “There were four skeletons! The bones also couldn’t belong to him!”

Bruno scoffed, anger tempting them to raise his voice. “Oh? How would you know?”

The question stumped Aster, and Alex and Blossom too, who were both cowering in the background at this point. The latter could even curl into a ball!

“He is right, Aster. The skeletons may not belong to Renard, but the bones could very well be his,” Alex concluded. “I think what matters now

is to figure out who could be his murderer now. Or… who could've caused any of this."

"How will we know?" Blossom asked, blinking in curiosity.

For the first time that day, Alex had a very confident, nearly cocky, grin. "The handwriting!" he declared as he valiantly pointed at the bloodied words.

For that second, Blossom inched closer to the text and squinted. Finally, she flinched. "Oh!" she exclaimed. Alex levelled with her and smirked. "Are you thinking of the same person as me?" he asked. At that, the girl profusely nodded. "Yes!"

Bruno and Aster, puzzled, approached them, both of whom were right against the wall. Once their presence was felt, they turned back to see their friends. "Who?" questioned the newcomer.

"Pips Pumpkin!" they announced in unison.

While Bruno was dazed, Aster scoffed like he always does, folding his arms, glaring at even Blossom. "Seriously? How would you know? That could be anyone's handwriting," he objected.

"Oh, Aster. Nobody in this school writes a capital 'I' like that!" sneered Alex. The 'I' was indeed different, since on the top was a thin line and on the bottom thicker. Despite that, Blossom mildly interjected. "Well, we can't be sure, can we?"

"We should ask around!" Bruno concluded, finishing her sentence, possibly. It should be true, since she followed him up with, "Exactly!"

Alex hesitated, audibly so by a moan, until he finally relented. "Alright. Let's ask around tomorrow," he declared.

During the whole exchange, Aster could only be seen scowling in the background. It was a wide and obvious one, even if he was only shrouded in the shadows, distanced from Bruno. Even if they agreed to take a step back, he didn't appear to be satisfied. When will he ever be?

Because of the ice from Aster, Blossom stared at him with a puppy-eyed look. “What’s the matter?” she asked. At that, Bruno and Alex proceeded to do the same thing she did: Glare at the teen with a leather jacket.

Despite the concern and obvious tensity in his eyes, Aster made a loud scoff and reserved himself by backing away further. “Nothing,” insisted the young man, “I was just thinking about things.” Things certainly is a broad term, yet Bruno knew what he exactly meant. It had to be about the bodies behind him.

“I know this is crazy, Aster, but we’ll figure things out before you can even say breadsticks!” reassured Blossom as she inched towards her friend and laid her arm on his shoulder.

The comfort made Aster hiss and push her arm out. “We’ll take forever, especially if we’re so bothered about…” He loudly scorned. “*Handwriting*!”

“Finding one’s handwriting is vital to any mystery that involves it, Aster,” Alex stated robotically, even adjusting his glasses to rub it in.

On the inside, Bruno agreed, although he didn’t want to speak much since he wished to not instigate anything between him and Aster, at least for the remainder of this time. His father had experience with solving cases like this, of course. He is a policeman! And with the slew of stories he was told, Bruno knew what Alex said definitely always applies.

“I know, I know,” Aster went on, “It’s just that…” At this point, he was at a loss for words, fumbling his motion too as his arms just recoiled. Perhaps anger invaded his mind. He breathed, then spoke again. “Never mind. Ignore me.”

While Blossom seemed apprehensive, she decided to face Alex as to avoid the tremoring Aster. “Right. Should we go?” she asked.

“Yes. We need to return here tomorrow with a camera. Do any of you have one?” Alex’s question jerked the other three as it swiftly succeeded a command. Nonetheless, Bruno was the first to answer. “I do.”

“Then the moment you get out of the bus tomorrow, get to me or Mandy, ask to open the door, and take the picture,” Alex told him. His tone then turned determined. “We must solve this.”

However, Bruno swiped his bag to the floor, carried it and zipped it open. His hand reached in, twisting it around the inside like mixing a bowl until he finally had the sensation of it. As soon as he did sense it, he drew it out, revealing a black digital camera.

As expected, the reveal of it caught Alex off-guard to the point where he flinched like the others. “Oh! You got it?” he slowly inquired.

“I thought I kept it! I did,” Bruno grinned.

At that instant, Aster was the one who was the most afraid for some reason. “Why do you have a camera? Do you have it all the time?” His voice was shaking as much as his skin.

“Yeah!” Bruno replied, acting oblivious to his fear. “Well, I’ve always planned to use it but never had the opportunity to because I’m going to look creepy if I do. It’s finally got a purpose now though!”

Suddenly, Blossom pulled the camera and, at the snap of a finger from the moment she snagged it, she clicked it, taking a picture out of it. The camera made a flash as well, which almost blinded Bruno. Once it was over, Blossom pulled it to get a clearer view of it, gaping her mouth in astonishment.

“Wow!” she exclaimed, “This is a good camera. Anos’s latest model, I see.”

“Yeah,” Bruno affirmed slowly as he tried to snatch back his rightful object. Blossom finally let it go once she noticed his efforts. As soon as he could see it, he was as impressed as the girl was, even Alex and

Aster who padded towards him to examine it. “It’s better than I thought! That’s incredible,” the newcomer commented.

“And that’s incredible for *us*!” Alex smirked as Bruno shuts the camera down and placed it in his scarlet bag. “Thank you, Bruno,” the leader added, making his friend turn pink. “Aww, no need to mention it. We’re just lucky, I guess.”

But the whole time, he couldn’t ignore the daunted Aster, seeming as horrified as he was when the four had peeled their eyes at the skeletons, if not more. His expression was even more emphasized when Alex passed him, along with Blossom following suit. The leader was even talking, yet it was drowned out and muffled by Bruno’s alarming assumptions about why his bully was reacting so oddly. Maybe he was just moody.

Then, he turned back to see the writing for the last time. Even if it wasn’t lit by the flashlight, he could see it well. That made him realize something as he started to follow his friends the same time Aster did. “You know, it’s not like it said Renard is dead either, it’s just that his body was…” He paused to swallow. “I-I don’t know, tampered with?”

“Well… *His body is taken*…” Alex reiterated with a whisper. “*No more will he be himself.*” Soon enough, his speech was halted with a braking gulp. “The chosen four…” The last three words were an attempt at a subtle mutter, but the others appeared to have heard it clearly.

“The chosen four? As in the prophecy, right? That’s what I assumed,” Blossom interjected quickly.

“Following the chosen four? For once, Bruno, you’re right. It is a little weird,” added Aster.

But Bruno didn’t seem to be as much in the know as them… “The chosen four? The prophecy?” He shook his head. “The ones to defeat Utter Darkness?”

The three nodded in unison, but only Blossom spoke. “That’s right.”

“You know… Four hearts become one to defeat Utter Darkness, but they must find his biggest weakness within themselves?” Aster asked further which made Bruno blink until he remembered it. “Oh! *That*!” The clarity went away as he thought about it again though as he spluttered, “Wait. Following the chosen four? Who are the chosen four then if Renard’s supposedly following them?”

Alex squirmed, uncertainty boiling him. “Honestly, I don’t know. None of us do. *However*, it is a common theory around the city that the chosen four are from this school, we just don’t know who,” he said.

“So you’re saying Renard is following someone in this school?”

But Bruno was stopped by Alex. “Well, the chosen four could also just be anyone who opposes Utter Darkness, like… Most of us.”

At that, Bruno, as much as in denial as them, dipped his head in defeat. “I guess it could be interpreted that way,” he murmured, not being satisfied with the unanswered question. Still, it’s not like they can spend all day lingering on that thought. They had something else to do. Luckily, he didn’t have to return the next day, so it’s not like he’ll ever see this place again. Better to just marinate on what’s happening in silence, like the others right after this conversation. But would it be that easy?

“*Four… Becoming one…*” he thought to himself. “*No. We can’t—that’s* impossible.”

Chapter 11

Politics Confidential

The next day spins around after the countless hours that passed before. Lessons were taught, students roamed around and everyone returned to the comfort of their homes. However, as routine would dictate, they had to turn around and arrive back at school again.

While it was dreadful for most, Bruno had anticipated the continuation of his previous adventure with Alex, Aster and Blossom, as if it's the next episode of a plot-heavy TV show. And at last, he did experience the expected.

After Bruno noticed his brooding brother fork away from him, he spotted Blossom passing over him by pure speed of her trot. He didn't even realize she was beside him the whole time.

"Blossom!" he whined as he caught up to her by the stairways among other students who swarmed through them. "What?" she spat once she stopped to stare at her friend.

"Where were you?" Bruno asked. "I didn't see you in the bus."

"I didn't use the bus. My mom wanted to take me…" she murmured before cutting herself off. For some reason, she appeared more… moody than usual. Her grim expression rubbing on Bruno. And for that moment, Blossom shrieked and whimpered. "I don't want to explain further."

Bruno clenched himself and almost launched away from the girl before he got a grip on the ground with his feet. "Oh, ok," he muttered. To

avoid the topic and distract himself, he heaved his head to manage to catch Blossom's sight. "Well, are you ready to talk to Pips?"

While she seemed reluctant at first, her body twitching, she eventually shed her scowl and turned over a smile. "Yeah," answered Blossom. "Alex should tell you when we can go."

At that, Bruno nodded, and at the same time, Blossom started to walk up to their floor. After sighing, he followed the speeding young lady.

That conversation was just the start, of course. Now Bruno had to speak to Alex, and that was much more harrowing than an exchange of a grouchy Blossom will ever be, especially after she warmed up to him. Oh boy…

Once he reached the classroom, he immediately spotted Alex, the light in the middle of the darkness that were his classmates messing around. He dashed to him, nearly dropping his backpack in the process until finally jumping on his seat. "Alex!" he called.

"What? I can hear you!" Alex yelled.

Bruno turned red then cleared his throat. "Sorry," muttered the boy. After his face turned normal, he spoke again. "When are we going to ask Pips?"

"When Aster comes, which on that note: Did you see him?" Alex asked, stumping Bruno like always, but this time, it *is* a cause for concern. That whole trek to the room… He was actively avoiding even looking at Class 4 as to not even meet the shady eyes of Aster. Now what?

So defeated and ashamed, he just sweated and bit his tongue. The subtle message was very, very clear to Alex. Obviously, it would be.

"Are you…!" Alex was about to start snarling, but he held himself by groaning. "Whatever." Alex's attempt at seeming disinterested was in vain. Bruno could clearly tell by the gloom beaming from his eyes.

Nonetheless, he kept those thoughts to himself. “Let’s get out. I already told Garcia and Ted.”

“Garcia isn’t—”

“She’s at the teacher’s office. Spencer will be in charge and with his father,” Alex quickly answered Bruno, who was left frozen again. After a shake of his head, he trailed behind his leader that began to move out of class. It’s almost like he’s trying to avoid his subjects!

The moment the door shut behind them though, Aster is seen across them emerging from Class 4, which was strangely blanketed in shadows unlike usual. The only way Bruno could even identify that the person was Aster by his noticeable black leather jacket and jeans that were of a lighter shade of the same color. Even his hair blended in, but it made him so much more discernible.

“Aster!” Bruno wailed.

At that instant, Alex snapped his neck to see, and it was indeed the short boy, now being joined by Blossom who crossed from Class 3 beside him. She pointed at them and smiled, then padded towards them with her friend.

“Hey guys! Ready now?” Blossom asked.

Alex grimaced though and asked, “Have you two asked your teachers’ permission?”

Aster sneered. “Of course we did. Do you really think we didn’t?”

“Oh, I definitely thought you would… Not!”

Bruno wedged between them as soon as their eyes began to burn each other. “Ok, can we start now?” he prompted both of them, making them cross their arms and lift their heads slightly, boldly holding themselves over him and his baseball cap. “Yes,” they answered.

Immediately, Blossom clenched Bruno’s palms and pulled him aside from their feisty friends to swoon at his eyes. “Let’s go!” she

cheered, though more eager than usual, a stark contrast to herself in the morning. Despite how out of the blue it was, Bruno could feel his heart racing and butterflies flying inside of him. Even his cheeks were firing up, but not in the same way as it was with Alex earlier.

Their friends seemingly ignored them, evidently by passing the pair, and they were still snarling at each other, though silently now. Eventually, Bruno and Blossom followed them into Class 3, where Blossom literally was seconds ago. Familiarity washed her over by the jerk of her body.

"Greetings, Class 3!" Alex bellowed the minute he pulled the door open, "I'm sorry to interrupt anything, I just want to call someone here."

Mando mumbled something under his grumpy breath, but it was unintelligible. It certainly was some rambling about the students just breaking in though. At the same time, Alex's pupils pointed at Pips, who met his gaze back with his own swampy eyes. Bruno finally got a good look at him when he stood up. "What is it?" Pips asked before Bruno could even see clearly.

Pips was a pale-skinned young boy, seemingly younger than everyone else in the room actually. He wore a haphazardly knit bluish-purple long-sleeved shirt, long smoky pants and a dashing cape of a darker shade flowing behind him. His eyes were deep, dark sienna, the same color as his bushy hair that was brushed downwards into a wave. Small streaks of river blue can slightly be seen highlighted at the front. On top of him was a crown made of paper mâché.

"We need you for the investigation," Alex declared.

Pips hesitated before pushing himself to the four. Shortly after, he glanced at his classmates, then grinned cheekily followed by him following Alex dashing out of the door. Bruno, Aster and Blossom took one last look at the room before also pushing their way out.

As soon as they left the room behind, they paused at the same time Pips did, adjusting his makeshift cape wrapping his back. Finally, he had the widest, most smug smile Bruno had ever seen, and that was among many other kids! His douchey voice also came into full force here. Pompous as ever. It was just as Bruno remembered, yet somehow much worse.

"You know, you should've called me Pascal Ingo Schlegelmilch, Mr. Alex," Pips overtly told him.

Alex hissed subtly, "Seriously?"

Meanwhile, Bruno tried not to burst into laughter, though it wasn't as bad as Aster and Blossom, who were about to straight up explode!

"Oh, Alex. Aren't you German? I'm of German descent—you out of everyone should call me by my real name!" Pips whined.

At that, Alex blinked, infuriated, appearing to be more insulted after every word spewed from him. Flabbergasted, he then spat, "That means nothing!"

"That's true," Bruno said. "Anyways, should we go somewhere now?" The follow-up question made Alex pause then shake. "That's right," he answered. By then, he started to bound towards the stairs and beckoned as he got away. "Over here!"

After Bruno gave a confused glance at Blossom, he followed her as she and Aster began to get their feet going, along with Pips eventually doing the same. As Bruno was trotting though, he began to really question where Pips' name came from… Luckily, he somehow managed to read his mind as he whispered into the newcomer's ear.

"You know, you can still call me Pips, newbie. People around here, they just like to call me that 'cause it's easier," Pips explained in a murmur. "Pumpkin? Tch. It's just because of my out of the world pies!"

Aster interjected after a hefty scoff. "Sure. "*Out of the world*" pies."

“YOU HEARD THAT!?” Pips yelled.

Yet, Aster rolled his eyes and Blossom smirked mischievously.

Alex then added more, not even looking at them, only showing his behind. “Bruno, he only got that name because his pies made the entire student body puke during a senior’s birthday party.”

In his secret, quiet mind, Bruno pictured that scenario going on and knowing that it’s real just made the moment hysterical in some twisted way. Though he also imagined that the “whole student body” was really just Alex and Team Toxic getting food poisoned. However, that was disproved by what Pips says next.

“Oh, it wasn’t *that* bad. I managed to give everyone a free day off! Wasn’t even my fault the pies made everyone sick,” Pips retorted.

At that, Alex took slower steps to level with Aster and Blossom, being more by the former’s side. This is because he simply wanted to give an appalled look to the both of them, which they were infected by, also having the same exact expression.

During all this, Bruno started to get tired of all the bantering, even rolling his eyes and sighing. He only wanted to focus on the task at hand, yet he started this whole commotion. Great.

Luckily, they shut up from that point onward until they reach a certain room that Alex skidded at a halt to, causing the others to copy him. Everyone but Alex stared blankly and riddled at the door.

“The janitor’s closet?” Bruno muttered.

Alex nodded. “He won’t mind.”

Before anyone else could protest, Alex immediately pulled Bruno inside, leaving Blossom, Aster and Pips awkwardly stranded out unless they entered. So, they did out of obligation. Blossom was the last to get in and was the one to carefully snap the door close.

Inside the closet was pure darkness, it reminded Bruno of the massive basement and passage inside the walls of the school. But this is just a simple closet. How was it so poorly lit? Well, barely. Alex lifted his arm to reach something. That something was a string to turn the lights on.

When he pulled it open, everything was finally clear to see, though in a yellow tint. Looking up, Bruno could find the hanging lightbulb shining everywhere, then, when he dipped his head down, he noted how much wider the closet was than he initially thought. There was even space for Pips to be parallel to Bruno, Alex, Aster and Blossom, who formed a line facing him. They were blocking the door inside, which did concern Bruno a bit, but not enough to voice it.

Surrounding them and especially behind Pips were shelves filled to the brim with cleaning products, like sprays and water, mostly cheap ones, and tons of brooms and mops, many that were even dusty and discarded… And filled with peculiar objects. Despite the odd environment, everyone appeared to be in the mood for business rather than acknowledging what was going on around them.

"So, what did you call me for, detectives?" asked Pips barrenly.

Alex swung his head to Bruno, who, as soon as he noticed, pulled his bag from behind and zipped it open to draw out his camera. As quickly as he could, he grasped to find the images and finally got to. He selected it to take over the camera's screen and showed it off grandly to Pips by giving it to him, making him gasp.

"What is *that*?!" Pips shrieked as he flinched, hitting the shelves even. Livid, he pointed at the red writing.

"*That* is *your* handwriting," stated Alex boldly.

At that, Pips' eyes darted from the camera he was gripping to the accusatory expressions on the four teen's faces. Flabbergasted and at an obvious loss for words, all he could do was mildly splutter nonsense

before recollecting himself to speak. "*My* handwriting!?" he wailed, almost dropping the camera.

Aster shoved himself closer to Pips, making the distance between them just an inch. "You know what you did, sucker. Just spit it out!" sneered the boy. Pips whimpered like a horrified lost dog at that point.

Luckily, before Aster could give him any scars, Alex pulled him away enough to control him. "Quit it, Aster! Let's handle this carefully," Alex advised. Then he turned to Bruno. "Say, isn't your father a police officer?"

"That's right. He's sort of a detective…" Bruno said.

Blossom snickered and slightly knocked her shoulder onto Bruno's. "Like father, like son, I see!" But Alex wasn't into joking. His face was the straightest out of everyone's. "Well, you should know how to interrogate… right?"

Bruno had the driest blink ever. After his second one, his face instantly melted into that of one that was unamused. "Seriously?" he grumbled. "You don't know after all this time?"

"Man, I thought you lot were intimidating. Terrance really was a wimp if he lost to you guys. Oh wait! He didn't! He lost to the literal martial artists of the school!" jeered Pips, followed by a cheeky chuckle that caused the interrogating kids to grimace greatly.

"Ok, that's enough!" Aster roared. Instantly, he charged at him again, now at a shorter distance between them than before. He had the heart of a bear and the fierceness of a tiger from the way he was acting towards Pips. "Stop fooling around and tell us what you've been up to!"

Pips quivered and stared at Aster as if he was just witnessing someone's murder. It was a stark contrast to how he was before, especially with the energy wafting out of him. The terror in his eyes reflected onto

Bruno, the same feeling now running through his every vein, yet he stayed quiet.

"Listen! I'm *not* involved in any of this! I know Renard's missing, but I am not involved, I swear! *I'm not involved*!" Pips kept repeating shakily. "Please don't do anything to me!" he continued begging.

Once he stopped but went on to still shiver, the teens exchanged curious glances at each other, then back with more sympathy towards Pips, though less so for Aster, even if he backed away just a smidge.

"Hey, don't panic, we won't actually hurt you," Bruno reassured.

Aster rolled his eyes at that and moaned. "Yeah, you could say that twice," he mumbled.

"Honestly though, who can blame us? With the way you were reacting, it really looked like—"

"It looked like you got caught red-handed and was, you know, shocked with how we figured it out!" Blossom continued Alex's sentence there, flailing her arms around like she's crazy.

Pips recollected himself after cleaning up the dust from his cape and taking a deep breath. Finally, he held a grip on their eyes as if the group was a singular being. Still, Bruno could feel the tingling from the poor young man.

"Well, your friend here scared me, that's all," Pips retorted, turning back to his regular self again, somehow, at the flick of a switch. He gestured towards Aster subtly while speaking with his eyes. Soon enough, he adjusted his paper mâché crown straight to the center of the top of his head. "But really, I'm genuinely clueless about this. I must admit, that *is* my handwriting, I just don't know how it ended up there."

Pips gave back the camera to Bruno, who was feeling glad that it wasn't broken the whole time he was shaking. Once he received it though,

he dipped down to examine it. While he was peeling his eyes, he could hear the disembodied voices of his friends and Pips, conversing.

"Well, what happened before yesterday? Or, er, since we returned to school?" Alex went on to ask.

There was a long pause, but it was eventually stopped by Pips answering. "I just had normal classes like you guys, really. But…" He gulped. It made Bruno tilt his head up from staring at the picture, which he found nothing of note anyways. It was the same haunting image as usual. "I believe two days ago, after the Class 2 students all stopped the search, I felt some… strange presence around me. And then I fell asleep during chemistry."

Blossom gasped. "I remember that! And then you—"

"I disappeared, yeah," Pips confirmed. "My whole world was black until I opened my eyes to see… something. Walls lit in a torch that disappeared soon after. I didn't see much though, but I could feel my finger touching it and some liquid. Then, next thing I know, I woke up back in class again!"

"Is that where you went, Pips? Wow," Blossom murmured in awe.

While Blossom was surprised about hearing this, Bruno was more stunned by his realization. If it wasn't for her additional words, Pips could really look like he was lying here, but now, it's different. Totally different. Now Bruno is beginning to believe that… Maybe this is what happened to Renard, except on such a larger scale.

It seems like the others are also having the same brainwaves. "Do you think Renard could've gone through the same thing?" Alex asked, leaning towards Bruno's ear.

"Could be," muttered Bruno.

"I sure hope I didn't get corrupted though! If I did, then I should really say my prayers," Pips said.

Aster got stunned in a strange way. He flinched. “Maybe *Renard* got corrupted, and that’s why he’s gone?” he muttered under his breath, yet Bruno could hear it very well. At that, he leaned closer to his friend. “Do you think so?” he asked.

That made the boy jerk again, almost hitting his back. “Well, uh, kind of,” stammered Aster as he stood up to straighten his leather jacket.

“Whatever it is, Renard’s probably dead at this point,” Pips shrugged as if the idea of death meant nothing. Obviously, the others reacted poorly, collectively glaring deeply at Pips again like they were doing multiple times earlier. Still, he pretended to be at bliss about what was going on.

Suddenly, Aster lunged at Pips and plummeted them to the floor, hitting the shelf behind along the way, making a couple of the cleaning products fall. Aster gripped firmly on the Class 3 member’s collar and supported himself from the squeaky floor. During that fall, Blossom gasped while Bruno and Alex subtly whimpered, although the latter appeared to be disapproving like before… It’s just that he does sort of agree with Aster at this point.

“Shut up, when will you learn how to do that!? Oh, but you’ve always been this way!” Aster hissed harshly.

Pips began to shiver and audibly shudder. “Ok, ok! Sorry!” he whined.

“Sorry, sorry,” Aster mocked, “you keep saying that, but you never change. Ever since you implemented that stupid rule…”

Bruno could feel the chill of his voice. His mood started to spike in rage, and a raw, personal one full of grudges. He was about to speak up, but then his speech got cut off by Blossom who hastily pleaded, “Aster! Please! There’s a better way than violence!”

Then, Aster could be seen turning his head towards his best friend, who was close to tearing up. “He’s my classmate! Don’t do this! Aster, you nearly do this too many times!” Blossom’s begging turned frantic by the millisecond until Aster sighed and lifted himself up to support himself on his feet. Pips followed, though shakier than before, and even more than the last time Aster charged at him.

“Just so you know, Pips, you nearly got bodied by a 5’1 immigrant,” Aster snarked for one last time to sting the egomaniac before he walked to Blossom and whispered something faint to her that Bruno couldn’t make out. After that, the newcomer exchanged a glance at Alex that was a mix of perplexion and fear, also with a dash of humiliation since he himself got physically bullied by Aster on the first day.

Alex didn’t return that emotion, however, and instead got calmer before the others. “Well, uhm,” he stuttered before clearing his throat, “so you *really* didn’t do it?”

Pips shook his head which made him normal again. “No,” he answered. “I mean, maybe I did and I didn’t know. Like I said, I could’ve gotten corrupted.”

“Corrupted,” Bruno muttered, “Like possessed by Utter Darkness, right?”

“Of course!” Pips curled his lips. It was clear that he was about to blurt out “idiot” but he cut himself off.

Alex rubbed his mind as to think things through while Blossom continued to stare in sorrow to Bruno, uncertain about the situation, and Aster could only scowl at him. Finally, Pips spat, “Besides, why would I even try to kill Renard?”

At that, Alex snapped back to normal, though in a more tempered state. “You used to be the leader of Class 3, that’s why! I know how you

were—you would do anything to take the other classes down! Even when you're not the leader now…"

Pips scoffed. "That's a ridiculous accusation, Alexander."

Somehow, Aster bounded to be next to Alex and scorned. "He isn't wrong to think of that. After all, *you* were the one to come up with that stupid rule about no romances between two rival classes," he pointed out.

When Aster was speaking, Bruno could tell that he had a thorn stuck in his heart, a bleeding one. It was subtle too, buried deep in his soul that he could only know of from seeing closer into his face. A chord was definitely struck when Pips was talking.

"That has nothing to do with this," Pips hissed.

Bruno noticed that Blossom and Pips met each other's eyes with a sharp, second-long glare before the girl dipped her head to look straight to the cheap floor. "I was right to come up with that rule. Everyone was turning unloyal!" Pips argued further.

"Unloyal to *you*," whispered Alex, exchanging enraged glances with the simply frustrated Aster.

"Right. Well, that still has nothing to do with the Renard situation. He's gone. That's all. I might have involvement, but I don't have any memories of it," Pips concluded as he raised his hands in a dismissive manner.

As he said that, Bruno's eyes started to shine towards Alex, who then noticed him. "What now, then?" he asked.

Alex shrugged. "I don't know," admitted the teen.

"Maybe you should ask the other leaders. Maybe they are involved. Maybe *you* are," Pips cheekily advised, though his tone grew more accusatory towards Alex in the end, his eyes piercing into who he pointed out. "Me?!" Alex screamed.

“Renard was a class swapper. Don’t you feel like he’s disloyal?” Pips asked.

Alex flung closer to the former leader. “Why should loyalty matter so much? All we’re doing is roleplaying and you’re taking things too seriously!” he replied blazingly, “Also, for your information, Renard hasn’t even spoken to any of his old classmates since he moved!”

Now the tension had truly risen in the air. It had made the atmosphere so thick, nobody could really breathe properly anymore, as if he wasn’t high already thanks to Aster. But at this moment, it’s genuinely personal. Alex and Pips probably knew each other very well because they had high power in their classes at some point.

“Never mind,” Alex moaned after a deep breath. “Never mind,” he repeated, as if he’s insisting to himself.

“Well, will you ask the other leaders?” Pips asked.

Aster folded his arms. “It’s not like we caught *their* handwriting though,” he snarled.

It was obvious at this point that Pips just wanted to throw dirt at everyone but him, perhaps even extending to Peppermint, the current leader of Class 3, his own leader. Even earlier, it seemed like his whole “loyalty” argument was just a ploy to gain control over others.

Pips grew a smug smile, the same one Bruno kept seeing from him. It looked like he won a silent argument with Bruno’s king, which caused him to have a bit of a jitter and shudder.

Alex then strictly and firmly pointed to the door out, his arms snapping as a result of him swiftly moving. “Get out,” he spat. As the boy turned his head towards Pips at the same time as Bruno, the leader had a perplexed and dumbfounded look on him, like he was a child who got grounded for a reason they couldn’t comprehend. Alex narrowed his eyes and hissed further. “Get out, now!”

His command finally made the former leader flinch. Soon, his fearful frown turned to that of a cocky furrow. “Fine,” he jeered back.

Right after his hardy huff, Pips marched right out of the janitor’s door, which Bruno just reminded himself that it was the closet for a staff member. The bulb was still somehow holding on during this whole ordeal too. The door slammed as soon as he was out of Alex’s sight, being closed by the boy himself.

Meanwhile, the other three kids exchanged speechless glances, as if they witnessed a meteor crashing down in front of them. Finally, after a while, Alex turned back to get a proper look at them. His eyes narrowed. There was a fire in him never seen before by Bruno.

“We wasted our time,” he icily declared.

“We didn’t,” Blossom argued faintly. She inched closer to the leader with soft steps. “We really should be asking the other leaders. Who knows? They probably used him as some scapegoat with the handwriting.”

Soon after, Alex had a heavy scoff, so much so that his thorax could’ve been puked out. “Oh? Now you’re agreeing with him?” he harshly snarled.

“I’m not agreeing with him! I’m just…” The girl paused to dart her eyes around, making her mind think of something. “Suggesting his idea.”

Bruno began to bound towards Alex, getting his feet parallel to his partner to make himself feel closer. Close enough to make him comfortable speaking up. “I hate to say it, but we really have no other options, Alex,” he said in a defeated tone.

Lost, Alex swung his head around the claustrophobic room, searching for Aster’s opinion. Sadly, for him, he didn’t verbally say anything, all he did was shrug to indicate how he felt. He really was in for

the deal and that's it. At that, Alex had a sharp hiss and sneered, "Alright, alright!" A curl of his lips bellowed, "Fine!" He paused to take some breaths before speaking again. "But if things go wrong… It won't be my fault. I'm telling you."

Bruno and Blossom gazed at each other for a second, then returned their sights to the yelling guy ahead of them, both smiling mischievously. "We know what we're doing," insisted the class prince.

Yet Alex huffed and facepalmed, making his sigh very deep. "I hope you do," he muttered with his mouth subtly moving.

Finally, he started to turn around to face the door and marched out, only having an order to say. "Now let's go and gather all the leaders if you're so interested." There was a note of intensity in his lines. Nonetheless, Bruno had one last smile at Blossom before following his leader. He didn't turn back to see if Aster also decided to come since he knew he'd get a nasty scowl out of the troublemaker. After all, they all had to go together.

Chapter 12

The Class Founder

By the time the four detectives arrived at Class 1, the bell had rung, indicating the turn of the period to the second one, which is break. Time had really passed and it started to concern Bruno. It didn't appear to be the same for the others though. They seem more focused on the task at hand, which was a wish for Bruno.

Once they got close enough to the door, Alex was one to knock on it. Despite it being a door with a window, everyone pretended there wasn't anyone, not even the person who answered the knock who was Robin, that Vice President Bruno has seen so many times his second week at school.

With his curly black hair and red-dye surrounding it, Robin stood fiercely in front of the group. Bruno only realized now how similar his build was to this vice leader. "Oh, hello!" Robin greeted.

"Hi, Robin," Blossom grinned.

Despite her cheery demeanor, Robin arched an eyebrow and stared at her like she's some animal at a zoo. "Uhm…" he stammered.

"We have no time for talking!" Alex yelped, "Robin, can you bring Harvey and Ryder? I can't explain why, just bring them!"

His urgent order made Robin panic more, making him submissive enough to shiver and retreat to the class. The four had thought that he cowered away, but it turned out that he really was listening to Alex and brought back a strange boy who Bruno had seen before, for obvious reasons, but one he didn't personally interact with. That is who he assumes to be Harvey too since Alex relaxed his face into a satisfied one.

Then there was another one, the one Bruno was more familiar with: Ryder. At least he can recognize one of them.

Strikingly, Alex rudely screeched, “Aster, Blossom, you two get your respective leaders too. Both your old and new ones.” His voice lowered to a murmur. “I need them all.”

The pair reluctantly nodded before heading off to their classrooms on opposite sides, one close to Class 1 and the other far away, parallel to Class 2, that being Class 4.

“Well, I sure didn’t expect to see you again today!” Harvey chirped.

Ryder held his arm high, covering his eyes from the nonexistent sun. “What is all this about, Alex?” he moaned, “And why is the light so weird?” The leader wasn’t wrong; it had gone warmer by the minute.

Alex gave the two leaders a searing glare before Aster and Blossom somehow appeared again, now beckoning the pair sets of rulers of their respective classes. A minute had only gone by, yet they came so swiftly.

“Oh, we didn’t even have to wait long,” commented Bruno quietly.

The other leaders in question were Peppermint and Pips, once again, both for Class 3, and Michael and Hannah representing Class 4. The first two appeared more impatient than everyone else around, especially Pips. Their eyes darkening and their feet pumping to signify that.

“Good morning,” Hannah formally greeted first. “What’s going on?” she went on to ask. The girl straightened her ash hoodie that was wrapping over her red shirt. Her straight brown hair wisped while she waited for an answer.

“Follow us and we’ll explain,” Alex stated. Soon after, he set off by turning back and strutting away. The leaders exchanged glances, all except for Pips who was simply turning his eyes into mere lines, then they proceeded to follow Bruno, Aster and Blossom who were marching along as well.

Passing the many classes to the first floor where they all hid inside a storage room, which the school had many of as Bruno would realize while having his quiet tour around. This one was the one right beside the stairs and near the exit to the school grounds that he would keep going through. It turns out that this room he thought was a simple extra room was for an actual purpose.

Unlike the janitor room, there was also a proper light source, with a switch to turn on three bulbs. Once Alex turned it on, Bruno could see how many boxes surrounded them.

He couldn't stop himself from questioning what objects were even being held here. It could very well just be junk from the thirty years this school had existed, but Bruno believed that there may be something else underneath the surface here.

After some time of ruminating around, he turned to Alex and his bullies. They then face the leaders when Pips speaks up. "Do you want to tell them or should I do the work?"

Alex shoved Pips slightly and gave him a disapproving look. "Shut up, I'll talk," he hissed. The other leaders jerked, having the most puzzled glances. "Renard has gone missing, and Pips here told us that one of you, or all of you, are involved."

Suddenly, the leaders clenched their teeth and fists, shivering and shuddering visibly. "So, is he right?" Alex asked, having an accusatory note in his breath, "Did you kill Renard?"

"Renard is dead!?" shrieked Michael, agony raining over him.

"It's pretty obvious that he is," Pips dismissed.

Alex was close to making his fists meet Pips' cheeks, but thankfully, he gripped himself. It certainly wasn't in his nature, though that's what

Bruno thought. Looks like he was up to his breaking point with the former leader.

"Renard is *not* dead, at least confirmed dead," corrected Alex. He had a scowl that was wide and deep, "He's just missing. That's all."

Finally, the leaders exchanged one last glance before fully recollecting themselves to talk normally. The first to give their word was Hannah, who appeared to be the leader of the leaders. "Well, we can say that we're *not* involved. We don't know where he is at all," she said.

Ryder snorted, "And why would we kill a random kid like him? All he does is shapeshift!"

"Golly, he's already a troublesome guy," Harvey casually sneered.

"Honestly, I won't be surprised if he just played hooky," Michael added, joining in with the jeering from everyone.

After a while of babbling from the leaders, Alex stomped his right foot boldly to the ground, almost causing a quake, and roared, "Enough of this!" That caught the attention of everyone, scaring Bruno, Aster and Blossom. "He did *not* play hooky, he did *not* just cause trouble, because guess what? He has been missing since Tuesday!" Raw fury raged out of every fiber of his being. Years of frustration turned into a tornado that stormed in his head.

Since the leaders flinched and backed away, their voices were cut down to mere mumbles. "Sorry," they apologized together.

Despite that, Alex groaned sharply and dipped down, his body almost curling to a sad figure on the ground. He firmly stood up though. Meanwhile, Bruno, Aster and Blossom stood there, though Bruno was the only one appearing to have any semblance of sympathy in his face.

Bruno drifted closer to Alex, nearly touching his friend's shoulder before holding himself back. Instead, all he could do was think in silence as his friend spoke again.

“We have no time to fool around now,” Alex announced, “How can I believe that none of you are involved?” A flint snarl could be heard from that question. “Pips said that Renard was a swapper, and that’s why I might be involved. But I’m not. Hannah, Michael, maybe you would target him for that reason. After all, you both have been members of his old class from the start.”

Michael and Hannah gave each other a deprecating look to each other before handing Alex a fiercer expression. “We swear to Mother that we are both not involved, despite our own… gripes,” Michael promised.

Bruno glanced at Alex, who was lazering his eyes on the pair of Class 4 politicians. He intervened by stepping an inch away from his leader. “I believe you,” he declared.

Once he said that, Bruno had a more confident glare at his friend, who scoffed and flung his eyes back. “I suppose you’re right,” Alex scorned, not even looking at anyone. “How about the rest of you?”

Peppermint huffed and straightened her collared bow. “Excuse me? Us too?” she shrieked, “Tch, why would we even try to hurt him?”

“It makes sense, Alex,” Bruno insisted. Really, on the inside, he just wanted to see peace among the classes. Perhaps him having the role of a vice leader would help him achieve that goal, still though, there were hurdles to be jumped over…

“I know it does,” Alex stated. His face relaxed somehow. “I just want to intimidate them.” He had a smug grin that made Bruno have a faint giggle. Even he can’t avoid admitting that it would be a little funny to see a couple of leaders get mad!

“No, but really, if you aren’t involved then we’ve ruled out some suspects… Even if the evidence itself is pretty…” Alex coughed seemingly sarcastically, “Vague.”

The leaders blinked together, except for Pips who was just sneering at this point. “Evidence?” Harvey prompted.

Once he spoke, Pips whispered into everyone’s ears, one by one, about what happened. Probably the traumatic picture of the wall written in blood with his own handwriting, no less. Clarity washed over their collective faces the moment they realized it, the moment they discovered why they specifically were called.

“Besides, why is this such a big deal?” Bruno suddenly asked once a question spawned in his brain.

Everyone stared at him as if he was a maniac. Only Hannah was the one willing to explain. “Well, it’s because of the class system that I invented,” she said.

Bruno’s eyes lit up as they shone in memory of her achievements. Indeed, he only now remembers what he was told during his tour on the first day. That Hannah founded the class system, the little “game” the tenth graders have been playing for the past eight grades.

“You see, everything really was a simple recess game. We got bored and I took inspiration from Henry Bagger,” she explained further. Bruno recognized that book series. Actually, it’s a super famous one among those their age. “You know how there are four houses, right? Well, I decided that we should have that sort of thing for classes… and that we’d be more like countries.”

“We’d be like clans!” interjected Harvey, excited as ever.

“Exactly!” Hannah beamed.

When Bruno turned to look at his partners, he noticed that there was a tender nugget of deep nostalgia floating in their eyes. It lustered greatly. It was so touching that it made the newcomer tingle even if he had only been in the school for a couple of weeks.

“When I got this amazing idea, I decided to tell everything. We divided ourselves by the classes we were in. I even told everyone to assign a leader,” she said, now glancing joyfully at Harvey and Pips, both having pride pounding inside them. “Harvey and Zina were voted while Pips was picked by the teacher.”

“I still remember when I was the runner-up,” Alex whispered, Bruno hearing it well enough. He does remember that information back when he first came to this school.

“And boom! The class system was formed! I never thought it’d develop anywhere from a roleplay game though,” chuckled Hannah, breathing deeply soon after, longing being exhaled.

Another question was raised by Bruno. “When did you guys get replaced then?” he asked.

Memories burned inside the former leaders while the newer ones backed away, and Alex clenched his teeth in despair. Their looks were avoided by each other until they met the brown gaze of Bruno. “It was when Zina died,” Harvey muttered.

“Yeah! She was killed mysteriously. When Alex stepped up as leader, we decided that our time was over. Well, *their* time, not mine,” Pips scoffed, making the others glare at him disapprovingly. He snorted, “I only joined in due to peer pressure.” There certainly was no care in his voice at all. It made all the other leaders glare searingly at him, to which he pretended to be oblivious towards.

Alex coughed. Sorrow was emitted before he gazed blankly at the leaders. “Alright, let’s stop reminiscing.”

His abrupt declaration made Bruno believe that he just wanted to avoid talking about his lost friend. That was confirmed when he went on to look at his partner’s face. Right there was raw grief written all over him. It struck Bruno’s solicitous heart.

After a bit, Alex turned to Bruno, Aster and Blossom and opened his mouth. “Looks like our work here is done, you three,” he announced. Then he faced the leaders, who all had uncertain expression until the Class 2 king spoke up to them too. “You all can leave.” They lit up and left as quickly as they could, all scrambling with murmurs littering the air, leaving that as their only remains once they were fully gone upstairs.

The only ones who stayed were the ones who initially had to leave: Bruno, Aster and Blossom. They were all patiently waiting for Alex to do… Something.

“Guys?” Alex muttered.

It seems like they’ve only just woken up now.

“Sorry, smarty pants,” snarked Aster immediately.

Alex huffed, rolling his formerly vacant eyes. “Let’s not get in trouble. I’ve had enough of going through detention because of you guys.”

“Me too?” Bruno yelped.

That made his partner stare bluntly at him, making him jerk and have his eyes flicker in a state of shock. “You’ve literally gotten me in another class in the first day alone!” Alex roared quickly.

Bruno gulped and smiled weirdly. “Right,” he stated.

Alex groaned, followed by him walking away finally. As he ascended the stairs, Bruno gave Blossom a soft glance before trailing behind his partner. He could hear and even feel the sorrow bubbling inside of Blossom as she thinks about her own best friend.

Chapter 13

Untold Tale

While the pair were approaching Floor 3, Bruno won't stop glancing at Alex. Not because of interest in how he looks, but rather in what's burning inside of him. Rage was stirring as evident by his cheeks turning rosy, and not in a good way. His mouth pouting said it all.

Yet Bruno stayed quiet until they reached the path to the tenth grade classes. On the turn that passes the ninth graders, the newcomer lifted his head to ask, "Do you regret making that deal with Aster?"

At that, Alex gave Bruno a side glance before looking straight-on. "I do," he admitted icily, "but I want him to shut up, even if he never does."

For a second, Bruno hesitated. His mind scrambled as he recalled everything that was told to him, the heaps of information plastered into his brain now coming back to him. It finally got him to pry into his friend further. "You had history with him, didn't you?"

Alex gaped his jaw. Soon enough, his eyes scattered and scampered all over the place. Bruno went on, turning more accusatory, "You said you were a part of Team Toxic. What happened?"

The leader swallowed. "You asked the same question to me before. I said I would—"

"Explain later?" Bruno snarled, suddenly skidding to a halt, causing Alex to copy him swiftly after. "When is *later*, Alex, or is that another way of saying never?"

Alex heaved his head, flinching it in disbelief and temper. Fury thrashed out of his face even harsher than before, turning it from pale to

almost a tan. “Oh? Is it your business now what my past is?” he questioned half-heartedly. “Quit poking your nose into everyone’s business!” His bark actually didn’t make Bruno bend down in distress. Instead, it energized him to stand firmly, although he still stayed quiet. A groan came from Alex, followed by his next sentence. “Ok, look.” He sounded quite defeated as he started. “If you want to know, go and ask your pretty girlfriend.”

Bruno flinched. That was what scared him. “Girlfriend?” He spluttered after, “You mean Blossom?”

Coldly and stiffly, Alex nodded. His eyes are now sunrays beaming into Bruno’s heart. The distance between the duo was that of a tightened rope. “Who else?” he hissed. “Well, maybe Blue.”

“Blossom *isn’t* my girlfriend.” Bruno gulped as he held back his words. “I mean, I like her. She is cute. I just…” He sighed, not even making eye contact with his partner. “I just don’t know if she likes me back.”

“I know her. She falls in love easily. Won’t be surprised if she returns your feelings,” Alex said. “Anyhow, she’ll tell you something.”

Once Alex disappeared from Bruno’s sight fully, he had a heavy breath, as if he ran a marathon of despair and confusion. His mind was littered with thoughts about him and Blossom. All this time he believed that his king cared about his personal affairs… While yes, he did state otherwise, his actions didn’t suggest that. Maybe he finally did change his mind, either that, or he never really cared at all… Not like he cares about anything anyways.

Either way, Blossom had arrived. She was right behind him, now with… Aster. Of course. The sight of the short boy made Bruno groan.

“Hi Bruno Boy!” Blossom gleefully greeted.

She dashed towards him, almost charging at some point. Finally, once she reached him, Bruno noticed how Aster sluggishly went onward to his classroom, then disappeared in there. While it bothered him, Blossom didn't seem to care. All she did was smile widely at the newcomer.

"What's the matter, huh?" she muttered.

Bruno hesitated, smirking afterwards. "Nothing." After that blurted out word though, his face plummeted to concern. "Well, I do want to ask you something."

His abrupt sentence made Blossom jerk. "What is it?"

At first, Bruno seemed uncertain but then he recollected himself. "Alex told me to ask you this but…" He gulped, "Why did he get kicked out of the group?"

Silence came. It daunted Bruno, however, his mood immediately changed once Blossom blasted a hysterical laugh right into his eardrums, followed by more of her cackles. "Oh, Bruno!" she tried to catch her breath, "Alex wasn't kicked out, sillyhead!"

During her laughter, Bruno turned red, embarrassment washed over him like a dam breaking to cause a sudden waterfall. His feet shuffled as his eyes danced away slightly.

Finally, Blossom managed to get herself together. "He just left! It was his decision, not ours," she explained swiftly. Bruno had curious brows, raising one. His brown eyes meeting the serene ones of his female friend. "Is that so?" he muttered, "Well then, do you know why he left?"

The question appeared to have stumped Blossom more than the last one. Now she was left thinking, her palms supporting her jaws as she was gathering her thoughts and memories, recollecting everything. It stayed like this until she lit up. "Right!" she exclaimed. "He had a nasty argument with Aster one day after the death of Hemlock."

That answer certainly raised more questions…

"Hemlock?" Bruno flinched. Actually, he does recognize that name. Blossom herself muttered it under her breath during their first meeting on the bus at the beginning of the school year. Perhaps now he'll get an explanation.

"Yes, Hemlock. Did Alex tell you anything about him?" Blossom inquired. At that, Bruno shook his head profusely. The girl had a smirk on her face. "Oh, he really missed out on a conversation then!" A hiccup came after a short giggle, which was then followed by her next statement. "You see, Hemlock was a friend of ours, an old member of this school. Sadly, he died one day."

There was a sudden pang in the young lady's voice. It throbbed Bruno harshly. That was the pain of sympathy, he supposed. Her vocals even drew to one of grief. "While his cause of death was never confirmed, me, Aster and Alex believe that he was badly corrupted…"

The wound in Bruno's heart grew larger every word that was uttered by his friend. It broke him to the point where he spoke up. "I'm sorry for your loss. He must've meant a lot to you and the others," he murmured.

Blossom nodded. "He sure did. I quite liked him." Subtly, there was a flavor of yearning love pouring out of her mouth.

"Anyways," the girl went on as if Hemlock didn't matter, when clearly, he did. Bruno could tell by the glimmer in her eyes. "like I said, Aster and Alex had a bit of an *altercation* and that's when your king left Team Toxic."

For once, there was clarity in the room, scattering in Bruno's mind too. "Thanks for telling me, Blossom," he told her, grinning, "I still wonder why Alex won't tell me though."

“Oh, Bruno. What Aster and Alex argued about… It’s something very sensitive, and something…” Blossom nearly appeared as if she was losing her words to the endless void of avoidance, “something that was personal between them.”

Despite the doubts on Blossom’s tone, Bruno did somewhat believe her. After all, every question that Alex had been dodging was about personal details as he would discover. This can’t be an exception. He still kept quiet, not because he had to bite his tongue, but because he was at a loss for words.

“Also, it’s for the better if you don’t bring this up to Aster and Alex. Alex might’ve told you to come to me, but don’t tell him that I told you anything I said right now. Got it?” she hissed at the end.

Reluctantly, Bruno nodded. He had more to speak to Alex about… Guess now that’s all gone.

“They trust me enough to keep their secrets, and I don’t want to break it, especially Aster’s. He may be a bit hot-headed, but when he trusts you, he’s genuinely good. Same for Alex!” Blossom said.

Bruno brightened up at the mention of his partner, mostly because she was possibly giving tips on how to make Alex look like he gives a damn about him. “Alex too?” he whinnied.

“Yeah,” smiled Blossom, “he’ll like you, Bruno! I’m surprised that you don’t think he does.”

A hollow sigh breathed from Bruno. It was a gust of wind to the trees of the concrete below him. “I don’t know,” he groaned, heartache stitched across his mouth.

“I mean, hey! He accepted my invite to our seventh-grade school dance even after he broke up with Team Toxic, like, two years ago!” joked Blossom, trying to ignore another fit of laughter, but contrasting the bliss

was Bruno's flinch of surprise. What stunned him was that there were clearly some romantic implications there… Was he going crazy?

"Even after leaving?" he whispered.

"Yeah! Weird, right?" Blossom chuckled finally. "I totally made Aster jealous," she cheekily added, probably not even addressing Bruno, rather some strange being above.

While Bruno could show some vitriol to her anecdotes, it would be hypocritical of him to do that. He himself participated in such acts as romancing someone else back then (that being Claire). If there were parties such as school dances and proms back in Brooklyn, then Bruno would've definitely done the same to Claire! Asking her out to dance on the floor… He was already reminiscing like it was something that happened to him, when it wasn't.

Nonetheless, Blossom chuckled some more before the bell rang. "Oops!" she yelped, "Time's up!"

"And I missed geography," Bruno sighed. It was a subject he enjoyed, and he just *had* to skip it.

Blossom jogged over to Class 3, not even saying a word to Bruno. Of course, he knew she'd get in more trouble than she already would be in, but still, he'd prefer at least a goodbye from her. Oh well. He heads onward to his class anyways, finding himself in the middle of Mr. Jones storming out of class. He could see some steam pumping out of his ears slightly.

Puzzled, he took a couple more steps just to find his classmates, except for Alex and Spencer, looking like zombies. Even Mandy and Max were close to dying inside and they weren't even human!

Once Bruno arrived to his seat and plummeted down to rest in it, he heard Alex's voice right to his ear. "If you're wondering about what

happened," he started, seemingly reading his partner's mind, "Mr. Jones gave our classmates a little group project."

"*Little*? It was anything but little! It was oh so painstaking!" wailed Bella dramatically, just like always.

Bruno's inquisitive side burst out as he began to question once he turned his back to see the two girls sitting behind. "What was it?"

"He wanted us to draw the entire map of the world… By memory! All twenty of us!" Nadia cried.

"It can't be *that* hard," retorted Bruno, sympathy shown only from his face since his voice suggested otherwise.

Despite that statement and Nadia's unwavering affection for him, she stared deeply into his soul while Bella moaned. She bent backwards so hard, her chair could've fallen and she could've banged her head on Violet's table just behind her. Luckily, that didn't happen, but she still was wallowing in her petty sorrow. Even Alex didn't seem so amused by his words as when Bruno turned to see him, all that could be told by his expression was that of raw disapproval.

"You don't know Jones well, do you?" hissed Alex.

Bruno pelted his head up. "Not really. I only knew him during my time in Class 1."

"Well, he's a perfectionist," Alex bluntly told him. "If you want proof, ask Spencer. He'll tell you all sorts of stories."

At that, Bruno swung his head back to find Spencer's head laid straight down on his table, bitter shame washed over his face even if it couldn't be seen. It irked even Bruno down to his core. After a bit of cringing, he turned back to Alex with a more distraught expression than before. He stammered, "M-maybe not."

Soon, he twisted his head around to find something, yet it was for nothing. Now he could only stare into Alex's deafening brown eyes. "Besides, what's the next lesson?"

Alex took a second or two to gather his memories. He was about to answer, but his words were intercepted by Nadia who spoke instead. "Sparring, if I'm not wrong."

Bruno flinched. "Sparring?" He had a note of surprise when talking. He only realized now how he didn't have a proper sparring class yet. The last time he was supposed to have one, the teachers were kidnapped. Hopefully things don't go wrong and they have the same supposed fate as Renard!

Once he smiled after the thoughts, some classmates rose from their seats and advanced to the door. Sheldon was the only one to call, "Come on!" He gestured his right arm to the door as everyone began to follow them, Bruno being one of the last.

Finally, the students arrived at the sparring gym, which was fairly away from their room. It was Floor 2 while they were in Floor 3. This was the version of the gym that Bruno knew from the first day, the one he assumed to be the true one.

It was, indeed, a lot smaller and more compact, though not by much. Still, the room was a lot larger than the average one in the school. Supposedly, it was to create a whole space for martial arts and schedules may conflict with the younger grade's PE.

It relieved Bruno to see the sparring teachers, both standing firm and tall, right in front of the door to greet their students as soon as they entered.

"Good morning, students!" they harmonized together.

“Good morning, Mr. Lane!” the students chanted. Lucky that they were brothers sharing a surname. If they weren’t, then only Mother knows how many names had to be used to refer to them!

“How are you today? Doing well?” Bruce asked. He was the taller of the two brothers, even if they’re twins. He had straight black hair, trimmed to strips, straight down, as opposed to his brother who had the same color hair but in a bun instead.

The students collectively nodded eagerly. Their joyous expressions told it all.

“Good! I like to see those faces!” Jackie grinned, his brother dipping his head along.

“Now, we had a bit of something hanging over us last lesson, but that’s fine because we’re here,” said Bruce.

“But the newcomer and the leader of this class here saved us!” continued Jackie as if the twins were completing each other’s sentences.

At once, the students put their hands together to form a harmony that heightened Bruno’s pride. There was a flare in his heart that told him that he was a hero, along with Alex who was also standing fiercely. It was a feeling the newcomer never experienced before.

Bruce intercepted the crowd though, stopping the cheering. “Alright, now let’s start the lesson,” his raspy voice declared.

Those words made the students disperse into different groups, mostly pairs that were similar to the ones made in class. Bruno was about to join Alex, who got a mat ready, but he was stopped by the teachers who were both behind him. An indication was made to turn back by the tap of his shoulder.

Ignoring the grunts and recoils heard from his classmates, Bruno had a blank gaze at Bruce and Jackie’s black eyes simultaneously. Alex also stared curiously, although he just stayed still over the blue mat.

“What the matter?” Bruno asked politely.

Bruce jerked. He had a clear of his throat just to poke his shoulder at his brother’s, who had a subtle groan before speaking for him. “We just want to thank you again.” After a heave of his head though, Jackie dipped it and lowered his voice. “But I’d also like to ask… Have you told anyone else about what we told you?”

That certainly perplexed Bruno enough to shake his head, not only in denial, but also in a loss of clarity. “No? About what?” he slowly questioned.

A sudden deep growl could be heard from Bruce who appeared to be too meek earlier but somehow, he loosened his fear up to speak. “About why Terrance kidnapped us.”

Finally, Bruno flinched as he was reminded of that. “Oh. No. I must admit, I sort of forgot about it,” he confessed with a spice of shame.

“It’s better if you do forget about it…” Jackie murmured, his eyes drawing down as if it was withdrawing from making eye contact at all. “We only told you because we saw you had an eager heart.”

While it was a compliment, this was still not too good to hear. After all, the story told to him could’ve happened to anyone and wasn’t much of a crime, at least as much as the teachers made it out to be with the tone of their voices. It was about how Terrance attempted to recruit the two sparring teachers into being Darkeners, just like him. How they used to be somewhat friends with the criminal back in college.

Nonetheless, Bruno kept quiet because he was frankly at a loss for words at this point. All he could articulate now was his face, which was that of concern.

It only took him a few seconds for him to muster up some words. “What’s wrong with telling anyone that?” he asked.

“If we’re associated with Terrance publicly, even if it was in the past, we’d basically be as good as dust on a shelf to the principal,” explained Jackie.

Bruce snorted though, clearly having a hint of an acrimonious tone to his speech. “Although it is kind of hypocritical. Did you know the new vice principal was a former Darkener?”

His brother had a silent whimper and a small shudder as if he heard those words for the first time. “Wait, really?” he quietly squirmed.

Bruce hesitated though, his eyes darting everywhere. “Well, maybe. That’s what Ms. Davidson told me.” Davidson was the physics teacher, a tough woman, but Bruno could tell she was a gossiper when he saw her briefly in the first day and even when he barely knew her for a bit earlier that week since she was so focused on starting lessons to mingle.

“Ah, if Davidson said so, then it must be true! That’s crazy!” Jackie whinnied as faintly as he could, and it didn’t even sound sarcastic at all. Every letter spouted was genuine, which Bruno didn’t expect when he heard the beginning sentence.

“Do you think he’ll be fine if…” Bruno was about to start but he halted himself by swallowing his words. “Never mind. I don’t think I’d even have a reason to tell anyone that you used to know Terrance anyways.”

Soon enough, before he head onto sparring with Alex, he stayed to ask one more question. “By the way, how was… Andrew like?”

The teachers’ eyes widened as they exchanged bewildered glances. “Andrew?” muttered Jackie.

After dipping his head, Bruno cleared up, “Yeah. You know, Terrance’s friend? Laurel and Max’s father?”

“No, we know. We were just a bit…”

“Shocked,” Jackie interrupted his brother, who then bopped his head along.

“I get it,” said Bruno, “I just recently heard that he’s taken to court after killing five people at a skateboard park.”

“Yes, that happened,” Jackie stated.

For some reason that couldn’t be explained, Bruce and Jackie both appeared to be awfully tense, probably because they were being shrouded in their nasty, angsty memories, trapped in those recollections just because one of their pupils asked. Still though, they managed to get themselves to talk again.

“You see, we didn’t know Andrew as much as knew Terrance but—” Bruce started.

“We knew he was a genius, but we already told you that.”

“What we didn’t tell you is that, from the times we met him, he was also kind of… cold.”

“But calculated too!”

“Yes! Very much so. He didn’t show much warmness when we met him for the first time, but we could tell that he had a lot going on in his mind.”

“From what Terrance told us, he had a rough childhood too.”

Bruno nodded along to every word, noting it all down in his head in case he does manage to meet Andy somehow. Probably through Max or even Laurel if he does find a way to befriend her again. Once she even came to his mind though, he spoke up.

“Did Laurel talk about him? Or Max?” he asked.

Sadly, the brothers shook their heads in unison.

“I get it,” Bruno sighed. Considering what he heard, and how Laurel acted back in Brooklyn, he wouldn’t be surprised if Andy wasn’t too much of a good influence on his kids.

For a moment, Bruno turned back to instantly look at Alex tilting his head in confusion. It was then that he realized that he had a lesson to attend to, one that he had been looking forward to for a while.

When he started going though, the teachers stopped him, both yelling, "Wait!"

He skidded to a halt, then spun around to find their faces that turned to those of sympathy. "Before you go, we have to tell you…"

"We know you're trying to figure out what's going on with Renard. While we have no answers, we believe Andy might have."

Bruno scowled though. All this time he could've just spoken to criminals. Sure. However, this sentiment was disproven after what was said next by Bruce.

"You do know that he was freed yesterday, right?"

It made the newcomer flinch immediately. He was so stunned; he had turned speechless and frozen. Yet Bruce and Jackie continued to speak. "Despite the evidence, his charges were actually given to… someone else. Don't ask us how."

What an eyeroll, Bruno thought. The system his father had been working under for decades really is a waste if they let a murderer like Andy off the hook. Alas, there could be nothing done about it.

"Anyways, you can ask him if you want to. Let him be a plan B of some sorts!" advised Jackie, straying away from the grimness of his twin's vocals. The bliss caused Bruno to happily bop his head in agreement and finally, he could head onto the lesson with Alex, who had a muddled expression worn and scratched his hair.

"What was that about?" the leader whispered.

"They told me what could be plan B," he told his friend, whose face turned from that of gloom that blossomed to a joyous one. "If we don't find out who could be behind the writing of course!"

After that, the two would begin to fight, now mellowed with the thought of their investigation going in one way. However, Bruno did question… Why would Andy even be involved?

Chapter 14

Vice

The day finally was done and dusted and a new one dawned. It went on as usual. Students entered their school and, while not eager, continued with their studies. Nothing out of the ordinary was really happening, just regular classes and what Bruno expected, of course with a hint of his own chaos thrown into the morning pot.

His own deep feelings about Blossom, that of hidden love. However, he also couldn't ignore the longing looks coming from Blue across the corridor. He could feel her heart pumping every minute he spoke to the girl drenched in pink. Alongside the young lady was Claire, who he noted kept scowling at him with her icy eyes.

"Bruno?" Blossom called, catching him staring back at Claire who only glanced at him actually.

He moaned slightly. "Yeah?"

"Are you ok? You seem tense," she told him, sympathy whining out of every note.

The boy nodded. "I'm alright."

Silence came through before Blossom sighed as she recollected her words. It looked as if a heavy weight was lifted from her shoulder once she spoke, "I know you're thinking about someone."

Once she said that, Bruno's heart had struck greatly, his pupils shrunk as he spluttered, "What? Who?"

As non-verbally as she could, Blossom elevated her head softly, gesturing towards the female friend group next to Class 1. Her indication

could be for Claire or Blue, so it confused Bruno even further as soon as he began gazing at them.

"Them?" he whispered further.

Finally, there was an answer. "Blue," Blossom stated in a tone stronger and tougher than usual, one more serious than her higher pitched voice could ever say.

Bruno gulped. She finally realized it, didn't she? "Right. Blue."

"Do you like her?" Blossom asked, her notes growing warmer.

At that, the newcomer shook his head profusely. "I don't," he refused bluntly.

But Blossom appeared to have something else floating in her mind other than Blue, and oh could the boy with a cap tell what she was about to go on saying. It sure will sting…

"What about Claire?" she hissed.

Shame poured out of Bruno more, much more than it ever did for Blue. His loyalty was supposed to be for Blossom and Alex and Class 2, not to some ex-friend he used to know, some ex he was supposed to ignore, and a random girl from another class. Slouching down, he could feel his eyes drooping out, tears that were about to rain down.

"Claire, huh?" Blossom went on in an increasingly accusatory tone.

"Claire… She's complicated," murmured Bruno, twisting his feet.

"I heard the rumors. You two used to love each other. Do you still like her that way, Bruno?"

Yet again, Bruno was given a harsh question… Unfortunately, he now can't lie anymore… can he? He didn't even deny it though. All he did was give his new friend his pleading seers. "Don't think of me badly, Blossom, please… Don't you know how hard it is to move on from someone?"

“I know the feeling too well, Bruno. I might’ve not dated Alex, but I still miss him. Every time I see you together with him, I remember those past days.”

Strangely enough, Blossom seemed a lot more vulnerable than usual. Her face mellowed to that of a widowed wife who just heard the news of her dead husband. Bruno could even hear her subtle whimper amongst the banging murmurs of the crowds of students. He had never seen her like this before.

Another nagging thought came to Bruno though. “If you think there’s nothing wrong it, then that’s good.” He finally went on to express the thought. “And look, just because I still like Claire doesn’t mean…” Water came to his throat as he choked, at least that was what he imagined. After he returned from dipping his head, he spotted the blank gaze of his friend.

“You love me?” Blossom asked.

Bruno blushed immediately. “Yes. I was about… to say that.”

At that instance, the girl turned red as well. Her former grimace turned to that of a yearnful smile. “I love you too, Bruno.”

Once she said that, Bruno turned on his inner light bulb, his face glowing and basking in its illumination. He had a wide grin and his blush grew further. His heart heated in the moment, not in rage, but in love. His freckles were now finally clearer than ever.

No longer was there any question in the room, in the corridor. Now pure, unfiltered love could be felt between the pair as their brown eyes met straight on. Bruno couldn’t ignore how luscious they were from the moment he confessed. Her ebony hair matched it.

Sadly, the tender moment got cut short once the bell harmonized, indicating the transition to the first actual class of the day.

That caused Bruno to wear a deep frown as he stared at Blossom again, his mouth gaping in the melancholy. However, the girl chuckled in subtle sorrow and gripped on his hand. It made Bruno feel like they were about to die and this moment was their last together.

"Looks like we gotta see each other again in the break… So goodbye," Blossom said softly.

She smiled at him once last time before she turned to face her class and marched towards it while Bruno was frozen, rethinking about the entire moment. Was he dreaming? He needs to be pinched. Although it wouldn't take him long enough to feel like he was being pinched.

"Bruno!" a voice called.

When Bruno turned back, he found Alex inching towards him, his beanie almost falling off out of frustration. "Where were you? Get in!" he beckoned as he was only a bit farther from the class door. The newcomer sighed and reluctantly got in along with Alex.

The moment he got in though, the leader stopped him by grasping his shoulder. "Look, I know what you were doing, but forget about it for today," he snarled.

It certainly made Bruno feel awkward. After all, Alex was sort of scolding him in front of class. Luckily, nobody appeared to have even noticed, all of them only focusing on mingling amongst themselves. "What do you mean?" the boy squandered.

"Haven't you heard? Didn't Blossom tell you while you were *dating*?" Alex hissed, especially emphasizing the last word to make Bruno have more of a tinge of shame on his face. Before he was about argue, the leader went on, "The new vice principal is coming!"

"Just on a Friday?" wailed Bruno.

“Yes, on a Friday!” snapped Alex, “Principal Dunkel told me yesterday that you and I must make a good first impression for our class as leaders, so don’t get your head hung around girls!”

Bruno could tell Alex’s sourness about this topic came from the fact that he lost the only girl he ever loved, at least that’s what he theorized. Nonetheless, he wished to smack back again with his words, widening his mouth to speak, but he was intercepted again.

“Including Nadia,” Alex added, trying to not get his eyes to glance at the aforementioned girl.

Still, Bruno stammered. “How? She’s literally our seat neighbor!” he tried to yell as quietly as he could, which was as possible as a task as telling a baby to drive a sportscar. His words woke up his classmates, yet they didn’t react, only staring dryly at their leaders.

Once Alex spun back slightly to notice, he growled at his prince again. “Just fight your temptations. I know you can do it.”

“I don’t even love Nadia,” groaned Bruno faintly.

When he looked, he caught Nadia flinching. She definitely heard what he said…

“Come on then,” Alex ordered, getting away, making Bruno ignore the sight he caught.

He and Alex sat down and waited for Mr. Turner to arrive like he once did in the beginning of the week. He eventually did, and that was when Bruno began to forget about what happened…

Eventually, the period passed and break came by. Despite its short time, Bruno felt like it took eons to finish. This was because he was separated from Blossom as he and Alex had to get ready to impress the vice principal. After all, he could arrive at any random point during the day

according to what Dunkel told the leader. The anticipation nearly killed Bruno enough for him to have the sensation of puking his heart.

Every minute he spotted Blossom laughing with Aster and the rest of Team Toxic, his guts began to twinge. It was either jealousy or rage over how she could even like someone as vile as Aster. He bet the rest of Team Toxic was better than him.

Finally, it was during physics that the moment had come.

"Don't worry! All you have to do is rearrange the formula and that's it," the blonde lady said. She had a tough structure, even her voice was fairly raspy. Of course, it was Ms. Davidson, or Kelsey Davidson. Bruno remembered that name from Bruce's mention of it the day before. How she spoke about the vice principal himself.

Before anyone knew it, he did arrive, ironically as Bruno only associated her with him at this point. It was when everyone was about to lift their pens and scratch on their books that Dunkel slammed the door open harshly.

"Students!" Dunkel called, making everyone lift their heads. "I bring you: our newest vice principal, James Lam!" His introduction was akin to that of a fabulous TV show host telling the audience who the newest contestant was.

When Lam stepped into view, avoiding being shrouded from the darkness of the barely lit corridors, the students could finally spot him fully for the first time. It was like seeing the first, most jaw-dropping rainbow after years. Now the weight that was on the leaders were freed.

"Good morning," Lam quietly greeted.

Bruno could tell that he was already going to be much softer than Dunkel ever would be, just by the sweet tone of his voice. He didn't even seem like a Darkener, who are usually savage and ruthless, as Davidson had rumored to one of the sparring twins. If Dunkel didn't even know this,

then it would be understandable. His demeanor also appeared to be that way as his legs were bundled together and his arms were the same.

Even his appearance matches his voice. He had a bright complexion, his messy, fluffy black hair contrasting that. It certainly was poofy and cotton-like. His oak eyes were kind and lowered. Matching his tone was his sweater that was the color of pure, natural vanilla and a very light gray coat over it. The pants underneath was as saturated as his top.

"Good morning," everyone proceeded to answer back.

"Now, as you may know, he is replacing the late Stuart Ringel as our vice principal," stated Dunkel. "Please treat him with the utmost respect. Stuart was a bit lenient on you lot, but trust me, Lam won't be the same." Bruno definitely couldn't see that. Lam didn't seem to be that kind of guy to even know what snitching is.

"Yes, principal," reaffirmed the students.

"Okay," Dunkel said. Soon, he glared at Kelsey, who jerked as soon as her eyes met his, then those pupils began to search for Bruno and Alex. He managed to not long after. "You two! Introduce Mr. Lam properly to your friends."

Bruno and Alex nodded, immediately getting up and approaching the vice principal. It was fairly obvious that he was flattered as his arms slightly flailed in shock. The teens' eyes shone greatly at the new second-in-command.

"Oh dear!" Lam exclaimed, "Thank you for being so formal."

Dunkel dipped his head in pride, grinning at his new fellow leader. However, it turned into a subtle frown after Lam spoke again. "But I really don't need this, Mr. Dunkel," he stated, his voice lowering to that of a mere whisper.

"Why not?" Dunkel snapped.

Lam hesitated for a second before responding in a higher tone. “I’m fine just knowing these students just as I meet them one-to-one for the first time.”

At that, Dunkel flung himself back, quietly hissing to himself. It was understandable why he appeared to be so bothered since he did order these students around to appear prim. Now that effort was wasted.

“I appreciate the effort though! I can tell I’m going to be working with incredible people,” Lam said. He spun to gaze at Bruno and Alex, meeting their brown eyes with his own darker ones. “Especially you two.” Suddenly, the man recoiled once he realized something, his mouth widening to create a shriek. “Hold up…” he mumbled. “Aren’t you the ones who got the infamous Terrance to prison?”

Bruno froze while Alex stared deeply at him for a possible word from him. However, that never happened as he kept quiet for a while. Dunkel too glared at him curiously, still maintaining his silence. Bruno had kept the mental note in him that Lam was a former Darkener… If he was one, then he’d definitely hold some form of grievance about what happened to his seemingly toughest comrade.

Finally though, Alex managed to speak up. “We were the ones.” Silently, he also added in a mutter, “Two other kids, too.” Clearly, he wanted to pin the blame on Aster and Blossom in case Lam got offended, which he strangely didn’t. Instead, he propped his head up in a flash of intrigue. “I thought I was mistaken for a second!” he exclaimed.

Even weirder was that Lam had a face of… relief? “You must be extraordinary children then if you were able to beat down such a mad man.”

“We didn’t exactly *beat* him…” murmured Bruno. If anything, he was the one being beaten, although he couldn’t admit it out of embarrassment.

“So what? You got him in prison!” Lam beamed. He sharply swung his head to Dunkel. “I can’t wait to know more about your kids, Dunkel. No—our kids!”

At last, Dunkel sighed as he finally got to see that sign of enthusiasm he was looking for like he just got news that he passed the hardest exam. At the same time, it was obvious that the principal knew something else, that something being why the weight of his appreciation for his students was so large. Did he know that Lam was a Darkener?

“That’s good to hear, vice principal,” Dunkel formally told him, “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Eventually, he turned to face his pupils while Bruno and Alex awkwardly stood there, the former gazing at Lam and even gave Davidson a slight glance. He spotted an expression of dread from the woman.

“Listen to what I said before and don’t mess with him,” Dunkel warned, his eyes turning into slits as he said that. There was a foreboding sense in him that irked the teenagers beneath him.

Soon enough, the principal turned around and raced out of the room, leaving Lam behind. It seemed like he willingly stayed and quietly communicated that to Dunkel since he went on to talk to Bruno and Alex. “Don’t be afraid to talk to me,” he said.

A looming thread tangled Bruno’s brain. Lam’s eyes gleamed, but now it looked like he was trying to gain his favor. Something was off. The once sweet Lam now seemed to be someone completely different, someone more sinister. The change throbbed Bruno.

After a bit of silence, Lam walked away, and immediately following that, everyone murmurs and mingled in the background. As soon as Bruno and Alex took their seats, the latter muttered into his partner’s ear. “What was that about? Why did you seem so… strung out about vice principal Lam?” he grilled at Bruno.

Splutters came from Bruno until he finally mumbled, “Alex, he’s a former Darkener!” He had thought that someone might’ve heard him, but thankfully, nobody appeared to.

Alex widened his eyes. “And who told you that?”

As quietly and discreetly as he could, Bruno pointed backwards with his thumbs, trying his best to not make eye contact with the physics teacher. Once Alex puzzled it out, he stared at Bruno as if he witnessed a war in front of him.

“Really?” he blabbered.

“Well, that’s what Mr. Bruce told me,” Bruno cleared up.

Alex backed away just an inch, almost slamming the wall behind him. “Oh, well, that shouldn’t mean anything if he was a Darkener once upon a time,” he sneered, “He might’ve been one of the many Darkeners who reformed back in, like, the early 2000’s.”

“Yes, he was a former Darkener, but does it really mean he won’t return to his ways?” Bruno questioned, fear jutting out of every word. “Think about it, Alex.” His bold statement made Alex lose his firmness, his grip on his seat. “Isn’t it a coincidence that he came to this school as soon as Renard has gone missing? Isn’t it weird that he only came just four days after he was supposed to come?”

Alex snarled, hissing with every word. “What are you implying here, Bruno? That *Lam* made Renard go missing?”

Bruno nodded slowly. With every drop of his head, Alex’s jaw dropped, then he shook. The newcomer could even tell his leader was about to burst out a forced incredulous laughter, yet it didn’t happen. All Alex could do now was speak, “That’s a bit ridiculous, my friend.”

“It’s not,” denied Bruno icily. “I’ll tell you what, let’s just talk to the principal. Maybe he’ll tell us something.”

“Now?” shrieked Alex.

"Yes. *Now*," the prince affirmed.

At that, Alex stammered as he had turned tongue-tied. His lips danced dumbly until he could properly form a sentence again. "How?"

To prove a point without words, Bruno stood up gallantly and headed to Ms. Davidson. It caused Alex to jerk and follow him, his feet nearly losing balance.

"Ms. Davidson, can we talk to the principal?" Bruno asked.

Davidson narrowed his eyes and angled it straight at the newcomer, her blonde hair now uncovering it. "Why?" she questioned.

Bruno swallowed. "We'd like to ask him something."

"Alright. I assume this is your leader business, so go on," Davidson shrugged carelessly.

The apathy in her voice struck Bruno, although it did grant him permission to get out alongside Alex, so he took the opportunity and dashed away with his reluctant friend. Looked like he did manage to string the leader along, miraculously enough.

The Class 2 leaders got along their way, rushing down upon noticing that the principal and Lam weren't there. The descent turned into a melody of heartbeats to Bruno, it took forever as well, much longer than usual. A flash of hope had come to the boy as he wished that the truth would be spilled and the puzzle pieces would be glued together.

Finally, they had arrived at the principal's office down on the first floor. However, they heard something very interesting coming from the non-soundproof door that was made of just wood. Across was vice principal Lam too, who was just patrolling out of the first and second grade classes.

The conversation was between Principal Dunkel and some parents… and they didn't seem to be any ordinary, random parents either.

“What do you mean you don’t know where our son is!?” a man yelled.

“Wait, Bruno,” Alex halted Bruno as soon as he was about to lunge out the door.

“I’m telling you, I know *nothing*. You yourself even said he was acting weird just at Central Park. I doubt the school has anything to do with—”

“Oh, you know it does,” the man screeched at Dunkel, interrupting him. The silence allowed the two boys to hear a woman sniffling and even some shuddering. “His friend told us that he wasn’t seen since the first period, or even before that, on Tuesday.”

“His friend… Max?” Dunkel spluttered. “He’s right, actually.”

“If you know he went missing during school hours then why didn’t you do anything?” the man went on to ask.

“What can I do? My students were investigating. You know, they’re the same ones who got a huge Darkener into jail. If they can do that, how can’t they find their own classmate?” Dunkel’s questions that were posed were genuine. It was the truth, but at the same time, the boys did get the man’s sentiment, which they gathered as Renard’s father. They also guessed that the weeping woman was his mother.

“What can you do?” the man retorted in a loud hiss. “Maybe you could’ve told the authorities as soon as he was reported missing? They only started today!”

The authorities? They started investigating? Bruno had thought that wouldn’t even be possible, but here they are. Perhaps it’s not either as nobody had even seen any grown man that isn’t a part of the staff in the premises.

“The authorities will do *nothing*,” Dunkel grimly told the harrowed father, “They already were useless with Terrance, what makes this

situation so different?" Suddenly, he cleared his throat. "Anyhow, it'll be likely that your son will come back. I don't think he died. If he did, then we'll owe every apology and wasted time to you."

Were they making a deal here? Questions littered Bruno's mind, none of which he could even voice without causing a ruckus.

"You should already," snarled the man.

"I agree," his wife added, that being the first time she spoke up. It seemed like she stopped wallowing in favor of being enraged.

"We should've never taken Renard to this school… Even St. Williams is better." The bitterness in the man's voice made Bruno tingle. His every nerve shivering at the same time, agreeing that those words were worth a thousand. "He'd be even happier with his friend there."

"Don't say that," his wife soon muttered. "If Renard begged to be here, then let him stay. It's his decision, not ours."

"Honey, he could be dead here!"

Before an argument could break out, Dunkel intercepted it. "Don't go fighting out here. I don't like to hear that," he jeered. "And don't fret too much about it. Artemis and Josette, I promise that your son will be fine. He won't be forgotten by us, at least by me."

There was hesitation felt just by the scramble of the voices of the parents before Dunkel went on. "Trust in the authorities you hired and in Renard's friends."

For a heartbeat, there was stillness in the room. Bruno anticipated something else to be said, yet it lasted until the door handle could be heard twitching. That's when he and Alex back away, gluing themselves to the wall as the door opened. Once it closed, they spotted the parents storming away. The father, Artemis, especially seemed to be heated as he was grumbling to himself while the mother, Josette, was patting him on the shoulder.

Bruno was stunned but Alex wasn't, evident by how he swiftly rounded from the door to reach the inside of the office. He was followed by his vice leader soon after.

Dunkel was enthralled in the sense of the ground. He stared at it until he bopped his head up, finally catching sight of the two entering students. "Wow, not even having the decency of knocking. What happened to you, Alex?" he sarcastically snarled.

Alex hissed back though. "I don't want to hear your scolding now." He spun his head to face Bruno. "My prince here would like to ask you something."

"Oh? Coming all the way here to ask me a simple question?" Dunkel sneered in an impatient manner. He didn't even let the guy speak!

"It's not a *simple* question, sir," Bruno stated. His eyes searched around, trying to not meet the principal's. It eventually did though, now fully seeing how inky his pupils are. "It's just about… Vice Principal Lam."

"Lam?" jeered Dunkel. "What about him?"

Dunkel's stand-offish tone was effective. It made Bruno recoil away from the table, just an inch. He shuddered. "Dunkel, he seems suspicious. Don't you think he's involved in Renard's disappearance? After all, he only came in just a few days after we realized he isn't here."

A moment came where the principal kept quiet. He rested his head on his bent hands that topped his arms that stood on the table. His stare at Bruno intimidated him further, even Alex who was only to his side. It only took him so long for him to respond.

"I know he isn't," professed Dunkel. "Why would he even do such a thing to some random student?"

Bruno thought about it. Perhaps he was kind of right about that. What made Renard so special? Although, there was that certain spice that made him extraordinary…

"He has shapeshifting abilities. That's what makes him not a random student," answered the newcomer.

Alex nodded along while Dunkel's face shrunk to that of a perplexed man that just lost to an argument, even if there wasn't one.

"Lam…" shuddered the principal.

"Mr. Dunkel?" Alex spluttered. "What's the matter?"

"And Lam is a Darkener," added Bruno, ignoring how shaky everyone else was in the room.

Once those words were spoken though… Dunkel raised his head, now his deep, pitch-black eyes piercing into Bruno's soul as it met his chest. "He…" the man breathed. "He can't be the one who made Renard disappear." While he refused, there was a strange air in his voice that indicated he couldn't argue with Bruno. His stance turned much more passive than it once did in the beginning of their interaction. "People say I'm doing nothing about the happenings in the school… All the students disappearing, all their dramas… If Lam is involved, then what am I?"

For the first time, there was grief in his melody. He was a weeping gambler who had just lost his best bet… but Bruno could feel something much worse as his body shook.

Bruno, shrouded in empathy, placed his arms on the desk, trying to catch his eyes with Dunkel. Eventually, their sights do meet. "Principal?" he called. Alex also approached closer just a bit before the man answered.

He shook his head as if he was resetting himself. "Excuse me, children," he coughed. "I was just feeling bit… emotional." At that, Bruno and Alex exchanged disappointed glances. Seriously, they expected him to return with some warm speech about how he felt. "Look, I really don't

know if Lam is involved or not. If he is, then I will fire him immediately. This branch's reputation is already in the gutters. It'll be worse if there's another scandal where the second-in-command is behind the disappearance of a missing child!" Yet again, he cleared his throat after he roared with moments of frustration puking out. "But I can't confirm it, of course. Nobody knows as of now. I mean, if anyone does, then I'd obviously tell you."

"If you do find evidence though, don't be afraid to tell me. I've been meaning to get involved, I really have been. I just don't know how to do that. After all, you're all already so capable and independent," Dunkel told the teenagers. Flattery flashed into Bruno's cheeks to turn it scarlet red.

"No need to mention it, sir!" he beamed. It only took a second later for him to realize that the principal had dodged any claims that Lam was a Darkener. Was he intentionally avoiding it or was he genuinely distracted by his distress? Either way, he kept quiet. They were wasting time at this point.

Before Alex could continue the conversation though, the bell rang. It alarmed the boys while Dunkel smirked. "Looks like time's up," he announced. Bruno and Alex turned from viewing the door then to see how lively Dunkel got behind the dark oak table. He just rebooted from being a buggy computer! "Now go on. You don't want to disappoint me by missing class, no?"

The question made the pair shake their heads while shivering, both of them only showing the top of their blue baseball cap and sunshine beanie to him. "Good," Dunkel whispered in a silkier voice than usual.

At once, the two boys marched out robotically, as if they were controlled discreetly by the principal. Once they shut the door though, they turned back to normal, now quivering in the thought of what they just did. At the very least, they can confirm that maybe Lam is a suspect.

Chapter 15

Torn Pages

Hours passed. Every breath Bruno took was a millisecond where he pondered about what could happen next. What could be the answer to the question, the question that is: Where is Renard?

It has only been four days, yet it felt like four years since the last time he saw his classmate. As agonizing as it was not knowing about what happened, he did enjoy the rest of the day somehow with the company of Blossom, with Alex's reluctant allowance of it.

Finally, once the school day was off and everyone got off their buses, landing on their homes as if it were the moon, Bruno had sat down for his dinner. He flinched at the sight of the meatloaf though.

"It's leftover meatloaf!" his mother, Maria, grinned.

"Amazing…" Bruno moaned as he punched a fork through the middle of it.

He even glanced with green eyes once he found Antonio gleefully gobbling off his bowl of brand-new spaghetti, albeit it was the simple kind for children. Still though, Bruno remembered how delectable they were.

The moment he finished, he rushed to pack his bag that he stored on the shelf right next to the front door. Once his father opened the door to greet his kids, Bruno dashed through him, though not before yelling, "Hi dad!"

His father, Ryan, turned back to look at him curiously. "Where are you going, little man?" he chuckled.

"Off to Central Park! Didn't I tell you and the others last night?" his son answered, trying not to snicker alongside his dad. At the same time, he began to get his shiny sapphire bike ready. Ryan dropped his jaw

in a moan of awe. Before he spoke again, Bruno drove away quickly, with all his might and determination to get there.

Through the roads and streets, Bruno managed to get to the famous and huge park unscathed. This was lucky considering how the circumstances in the metropolis were getting heated at the moment.

As he reached and parked the bike, tying it to a random light pole, he stared at it and longed for a skating board. It was his former passion in Brooklyn that he sadly had to leave behind once he moved away. That old board he formerly had… It's now sold away to some other kid who benefits from it as much as he did ages ago.

Stopping himself from thinking about the past, he gripped his feet into the ground firmly, slowly getting himself back to reality. The second he did, he turned around and followed the path, noting down mentally where his bike was with every monument close by, from a water fountain to even a branch's location beside a tree. He remembers every detail he would note down for exams after all, so this was just natural for him.

Finally having the walk he came for, he could breathe in the fresh air that he hoped he would when he moved to Manhattan. This was an activity he yearned to do and he did after a week. It wasn't such a waste either. Surrounding him was a lush jungle filled with brilliant emerald green. It shone as greatly as the gem even if it was still sunset. As a matter of fact, the sky made the moment better by a tenfold. The fire-lit coloration of it contrasted its environment to the point where it would look perfect in a painting.

When Bruno looked down, he could also spot many others having a little trot like him, though mostly for exercise rather than relaxation for him. Not like everyone underwent as much as chaos he did. However, he did truly come here for a reason other than to unwind.

Last time he heard, Renard was seen having suspicious activity where he was prior to his disappearance. If Bruno does manage to puzzle out what's going on, it had to be right in the soil he was standing on… At least he hoped he could figure it out. The park was famed for being so spacious, it was compared to a football field for Mother's sake! There was no way Bruno could pinpoint where Renard was just in one evening. Yet he was determined he could fulfill such an impossible task. It was for Renard. Fire had continually burned inside of him. He was the sun spying over planets and asteroids as he trudged through the park.

Suddenly, in the middle of the minty clearing and the hoards of people hanging out on benches and lying on the grass, Bruno caught Max there and with a man. It was only the two of them though.

Searching if anyone was watching, Bruno's eyes darted around before he finally managed to trudge through the tilted pavement and reach Max with the man sitting on a bench. Max stopped flying his rhombus kite once he spotted his classmate.

"Good evening, Bruno!" he joyfully greeted. "I didn't expect to see you again after school. How are you?"

Warmness fired up the average boy. "I'm feeling great. The air here is incredible!" he commented.

"I know, right? Too bad I can't exactly breathe it though," proclaimed Max. It made his classmate feel awkward as he remembered slowly how he's not even a person. Oops. "It's fine," the boy continued, "I know what you mean!"

Bruno, relieved from feeling pricked, lifted his head to view clearly the man sitting beside Max. It was plain to see that they were related since they had the same caramel hair, although the man's was a lot smoother. It looked like he had just stepped out of a steamed shower. Considering that,

he approached him, with a bit of caution in case he was mistaken, of course.

"Uhm, hello?" he stammered.

The man indulged himself in a piece of newspaper, covering his face with it as a mask. It was until Bruno spoke that he was poking his nose on the paper. After that, he slid it down to reveal his snowy face.

"What?" he snarled.

Before Bruno could talk again, Max interrupted him. "Father! This boy is my classmate: Bruno!"

Once the name was spouted, the man flinched, dropping his newspaper to the leaf-ridden ground. Even a fraction of a whimper could be heard. "Bruno…?" he shuddered.

"What's wrong, father?" Max squeaked.

Daunting stillness came by when Bruno stared deeply at the man, examining him, trying to jog his memories about what could possibly be off… Until he realized it… This man, as Max's father, is Andrew Lopez… The friend of Terrance that the sparring teachers mentioned on the first day! "Are you scared because I got your best friend in prison?" accused Bruno.

Max jerked. "Best friend? In prison?" It seemed he was going through a software crash at the moment since he was so confused. He was a non-responsive program.

"Terrance…" rasped the man. "Are you talking about him?" Suddenly, his head dashed to glare at his son. "How does he know?"

It was at that moment Max gasped in the same realization as Bruno, but it was the one he made a week ago. "Are you friends with Terrance!?"

"No! We're not—" Andrew spluttered before he halted his speech. His words were being scrambled into static. "We never knew each other. Who even is Terrance?"

Bruno's heart plummeted. Max's father had a cold face worn that stared at the boy. He knew deep down that Andrew once knew the psycho, but he also knew he was saving his skin here from his son.

"Father, is Bruno right?" Max questioned, innocence spitting.

"No!" denied Andrew harshly.

Then Bruno recollected what the sparring teachers advised him the day before. He was supposed to ask Andy as plan B, but what does it mean anymore when the interview is being handed to him on a silver platter? Either way, the man resigned himself from the conversation, now staring blankly at the countless skyscrapers towering over the group. It was an opportunity for the teens to converse.

"Well, Max," Bruno started, whispering now. His friend gazed at him in confusion. "The Lanes told me to ask him about Renard…"

"Renard? He's involved with that?" Max blabbered. "What else is he involved with that I don't know?" Grief appeared to be dawning on him now, mixed with how riddled he was.

Bruno sighed, heaving his chest. "I don't know, but what I *do* know is that he once knew Terrance."

Max sweated, his palms heating up in the anxiety. He glanced at his father, now more terrified than Bruno had ever seen him be. The both of them were trapped in a wide sparring room, yet this was the robot's most fearful moment.

"Father?" choked Max. At once, Andy dipped his head, directing his pupils at his manmade child. "Bruno would… like to talk to you more." He swallowed in the middle of his sentence.

"Do you think I'll entertain him like this?" snapped Andy, his tone growing more aggressive which even notation of a letter.

Max mellowed his muscles. “Come on, father. You know I won’t really care if you did know Terrance. I mean, you didn’t see me mind when you were freed from court, right?”

For a moment, Andy hesitated as his eyes’ shine grew to the point where it overtook its top half. Once he blinked, he sighed. “Yes, that’s true,” he muttered.

“Don’t be scared of Bruno. He won’t haul you…” Max paused to glance at his classmate. “Right?” Bruno nodded in affirmation; he even grinned to reassure Andy even further.

Andy sighed. “Uhm…” he stammered. “I don’t even know who Renard is.”

Bruno’s face drooped as soon as that was said while Max blinked dryly. “Really?” the robot murmured. Andy hesitated though until he gathered himself again. “Well, I know he’s your friend, but that’s all.”

“I don’t believe you,” proclaimed Bruno adamantly.

However, the man chortled incredulously. “Don’t believe me?” His once soft tone now turned rougher, akin to that of spikes on a cactus. “How will I make you believe me then? Give you video footage or something?” While the father’s words were scampering, Bruno still held himself together as the energy of his infuriation fueled him.

“If you want answers, then it’s not from me,” Andy stated as if it was his final words. It was then that Bruno spaced out his eyes, realizing that maybe Max’s creator was at least telling a shred of truth. That could be heard from the raspy notes that Max copied when he was being questioned continually about his partner.

Hesitantly, Bruno cautiously responded after seconds of silence. “Fine,” he curled his lips. “If you’re telling the truth, then I should be asking someone else.”

When the boy looked at Andy for supposedly the last time, he could see warmness melting in his face as he sluggishly formed a smile. Perhaps he was right to trust him then. Still though, there was the lingering thought beckoning his mind to another train. It was all about the man's past. However, it wasn't him who brought it up, rather Max.

"That's great and all, but I still want to know: Is it really true that you used to know Terrance, father?"

"I just said I don't know him," hissed Andy sharply. His eyes suddenly turned to slits as it instantly switched from kindness to that of callous. "Didn't you listen!?"

Yet Max didn't back away, or flinch, or even react. He just had a daunting stare-off at his creator. "Of course I did. All robots have the abilities of a computer, including a recorder. I track everything you said, and you clearly had the sound of hesitation before you denied anything."

Once he said that, Bruno swiveled his head around curiously at the development of events here. What did he escalate in this family drama? Only Mother knows!

"That wasn't hesitation. You could've mistaken it for anything," huffed Andy, not even giving any eyes at Max.

"I know how you sound well, father," Max hollered.

Abruptly, Andy snapped his neck to glare at his material child. The sharpness of it made Bruno's senses tingle, although it wasn't the same for his peer. He only was a statue, boldly staring back at his dad.

"Terrance has nothing to do with me!" Andy roared.

"Then are Bruce and Jackie liars?" whimpered Bruno. His former solid stance now declining to that of a scrawny young man.

At that heartbeat, Andy narrowed his eyes, not in rage, but in defeat. He was about to stand, but he stopped himself as he began to drop down

on the bench. Excruciating his head was, it appeared he had a migraine from what was going on. Seasons of pain wept as the man winced.

When Bruno turned, he found that there was sympathy slowly fading into Max's eyes, his system being bombarded by the foreign concept for a machine. "Sorry, father," whispered the robot.

Bruno had only noticed now how the kite was trapped in a tree. He imagined that it was how Max felt at the moment. Max was the kite. While he wished to stay, his classmate spun to him and now he had an expression that was on the brink of glumness. It connected with Bruno to the point where he too was wrenched.

"Bruno, you can go now, if you want to," Max suggested.

At that, the boy made his head rise. That was when he noticed how ill-lit the sky was getting. Twilight certainly came by quickly. It was dark blue, almost black. The only illumination was from the abundance of skyscrapers acting as stars. Now he had made his decision.

"Alright, Max. I'll see you tomorrow," he said mournfully.

A while after he stepped away from his classmate though, Bruno felt a sense of doom looming over him. Like some discovery, some important matter will occur just about now, but he couldn't put a finger on what. Something that will solve the mystery will be handed to him just by a walk in the park, literally.

The answer was given once he took a step. A sensation came to him that was peculiar. It was like he stomped on cardboard. Bumfuzzled as he was, Bruno's eyes circled around until he let his funny feet go. As it slid, he felt something else moving alongside him. That was when he dipped his head to find a book, but it was dismantled. Horribly mangled. Bruno paused his walk to examine it while standing still.

The book's pages were barely holding onto it, latching onto its only vessel into living. It was on life support with how crumbled and shredded the sheets were, the creases made were plentiful and made it incredibly busted in such a terrible way. The front cover's colors were even sickly, so desaturated to the point where Bruno questioned how it originally looked like.

There were only few words that could be spelled out and survived. Luckily, it was the title as the boy assumed. "Dusk and Dawn?" Bruno muttered in astonishment while staring down at what he trampled on. It had to be true considering how insanely famous it was.

Hesitantly and discreetly, Bruno picked up the corpse and heard its last breaths as a few of its ancient pages rained to the pavement. After the boy blew out the dust, he could finally clearly read at least some of what was written, both on the cover and its main content.

He peeked inside to find something interesting on the first page alone. "Property of Richard Winston," he read, puzzled.

As he flipped the pages cautiously, as to prevent any pages from dying further, he skimmed through the text. Of course, he recognized what it may entail. Dusk and Dawn is a whole fantasy romance novel about a teenage girl falling in love with a zombie, who were apparently oppressed. Considering how deadly they are, it was obvious why the couple wouldn't be allowed together.

Bruno had read the novel once back in middle school shortly before he swapped schools in Brooklyn. He sought comfort in it since it reminded him of Claire, whom he longed much harder for back then. Since he only read it once, however, he forgot about most of the details by then. Nonetheless, how the book even got here, especially a copy that looked like it was decades old even if the book released about three years ago, was a complete mystery, and a chilling one at that. Who even is Richard

Winston? The guy must be irresponsible if he left a whole 500-page novel just like that in the middle of one of America's largest parks.

As Bruno turned every page though, he kept finding scribbles and rudimentary drawings from the reader, and most freakishly, writing in a foreign language which the blue boy couldn't recognize, but he knew that it was one spoken somewhere in Asia. His eyes widened as he kept skimming, finding more doodles until finally, it was over and he reached the end.

Suddenly, as he was about to close the book, he opened the final page again to find another name… "Tadashi Suzuki," Bruno gasped. "That… That's Tadashi!" he proclaimed silently.

At first, he debated whether he should leave the book there, but as soon as he read that name, he knew this novel had something to do with this case. He could just… feel it right in his insides. He especially recalled how Tadashi was last seen right where he was with Renard. There was a chance he read this book on that faithful night. Maybe even the foreign text has an answer, despite it not being Japanese like Tadashi's name would suggest.

Bruno could very well have jogged his memories on who is Asian in the school. Sadly, it was impossible since he didn't know everyone in his year, and even then, he'd just be wasting time when he could be returning home. So he did exactly that. He snatched the book, convincing himself the whole way back that he didn't just steal someone's book and that this was for the greater good.

He drifted his bike away, blending into the night, leaving the park behind with only the memory he had experienced, and that he had to keep it for the weekend, which he had only realized just as he scootered away.

Chapter 16

Unlikely Friends

By the end of the weekend, and his sick leave on Monday, Bruno had already read the majority of the remaining fifty or so pages thoroughly. Unfortunately, he found nothing too notable, nothing other than foreign words that appear gibberish to the English and Spanish-speaking Bruno. He only yearned to know what any of it meant, and he even had a pang inside him that wished translating it meant anything. Now the only thing that repeated to him was the name of Tadashi, not even anything from the book itself.

When he got to school, he hoped that he would find an answer as soon as he stepped into the bus and approached Blossom. There, on his seat adjacent to the window, he immediately told her about it.

"Hey, Blossom," he started with a whisper. It caught the girl's attention to where she gazed at him curiously. He could tell she was about to ask him why he was absent the day before, but he interrupted her. "So, uh, on Friday, I went on a walk in Central Park, and I found something that may help with the investigation."

Blossom blinked, and once she opened her eye, it refreshed her into being wide-eyed and shocked. "Really? What is it?" she stammered.

At that, Bruno twisted his apple backpack around and zipped it open, drawing out the scruffy book. Blossom stared in awe. Her mouth was covered by her slowly sweating palms. She appeared to be more stunned than she was when Bruno took ownership of the dusty old book on the first day.

"Dusk and Dawn?" the long-skirted girl spluttered.

"Yeah," Bruno confirmed. "I found it while walking."

Blossom continued to gaze at it blankly until she spoke again. “It looks so old…”

“I know, right?” Bruno chortled. He snapped to a state of inquisitiveness though. “You know what’s interesting?” he started. Then he proceeded to turn to the last page, the very page holding the name of… “Tadashi Suzuki!” Blossom exclaimed.

“Yes, I think he owned this book!” blathered Bruno, almost at a loss for words since he was so shaky.

“And it was in Central Park, where Renard was last seen… with him,” Blossom stated, continuing what her friend would otherwise go on to say. She yelped at a conclusion. “This book must have information!”

“Exactly!” Bruno beamed, his eyes gleaming of connection with her. However, he soon got wilted as he began to flip the pages though. “There’s even other writing. The problem is though: It’s all in a language that I don’t know of.”

Once Bruno showed off the pages, he handed it to Blossom so she could examine it further. She drew it so close to her; her nose could’ve poked a hole through the already unstable book. She even muttered, “Tadashi is Japanese.” It confirmed Bruno’s theories before. “This is Tagalog…”

“Tagalog… The language of the Philippines…” Bruno breathed after he took a pause to realize it. His eyes skirted around as he stared deeply at the book, now taking a different meaning to his brain. Richard Winston… He must’ve been the one who wrote the nonsense in the Filipino dialect.

“Do you know who Richard is?” Bruno soon asked, forcibly turning the page to the first one that embedded its name. Blossom examined it, pushing the book from closer to farther from view until she got it exactly where she wanted it to be.

A squeaky gasp came out of her tiny mouth, which then dropped to a silent sigh. “No, I actually don’t,” she announced.

Bruno’s eyes turned grim, as much as the rest of his face had. His brown hair could feel itself drooping in the gloom. It was until he recounted what he was told again, every bit of information he had attained the past few days. Finally, he landed on some sort of clue, but it was an ugly one for his crush in front of him.

“Could Richard be Aster?”

As soon as the boy asked that, Blossom bounced, twitching her every muscle at that possibility. Her sight gaped at Bruno, hollowed into that of horror. “He can’t be,” she winced in denial. “He really can’t!” she repeated, now on the edge of stammering. “If he was behind Renard’s disappearance, why would he help us?”

It was a consideration Bruno didn’t think up of. After all, Aster was the one close to attacking Pips earlier just because he shared the possibility that Renard was as good as dead—like his death wouldn’t matter. So that could disprove the sentiment.

Nonetheless, Bruno still wanted to believe that Aster is behind all this. He bullied him for too long, even if they’re supposed to be teammates bound by the deal made with Alex. Everyday, Bruno wouldn’t stop spotting the foreigner eyeing him with a scalding look. It irked him too much to disbelieve his claim. If anything, this would make his hatred of Aster much more justified.

“He wanted us to trust him,” Bruno quietly sneered into Blossom’s miniscule ears. “I bet my stars that he’s behind this!”

“He isn’t,” Blossom spat. “Bruno, I get that you and Aster don’t get along, but that doesn’t mean he’ll spite you enough to kidnap an innocent student!” Her voice suddenly lowered to that of a mere whimper, like that

of a pony, like she was a grieving woman in front of a tomb. “I know Aster all too well. He would never do such a thing.”

Finally, Bruno sighed. Conclusion lured him enough to a flame where he just said, “Alright, fine. I’m just making a suggestion.”

After Blossom stared more into the book in silence, her eyes trudging through every letter, she lifted her head slightly to level her sight with Bruno. “Anyhow, at least we can agree that this book is strange. We really got to show it to the others, and we need to ask Aster for a translation of these words.”

Bruno nodded, although on the inside, he felt extremely reluctant. This was because of the argument that had happened… If this was repeated on the others, well, only Mother would know how much worse he’ll get out of those double-A boys. Aster would accuse him of being racist while Alex would be scoffing at the fact that the mentioned boy would even be useful, or at the idea that a random, rusty book would be close to a clue in this search. After all, Alex already disliked how Bruno owns a dusty old book himself, why would this one be different?

Once the book shut and Bruno stored it back, he took one last glance at Blossom. However, it took the entire bus ride for him to stop it. He had turned red, forgetting about the little spat they had earlier, ignoring it for how she appears now.

He admired her smooth, silky hair, skin of the same texture, her bubblegum long skirt that formed a kimono-looking outfit, and especially her pink-toned eyes that were the shape of an almond. Her cherry blossom flower was the cherry on top, fittingly enough. When he put her hand onto hers slightly, he felt the touch of a pillow from her. She too seemed to reciprocate the feeling as her gaze was also fixed on his. Bruno’s heart fluttered, butterflies formed inside of his stomach, begging to get out. His heart was racing, not in anxiety, but in the storm of his love.

Once the bus stopped and everyone escaped from the prison that were the seats drenched in muck, Bruno and Blossom were strutting side by side, their feet closest to each other out of every other student waving past them. Their eyes still couldn't stop being glued to each other until Bruno bumped into the scrawny Aster.

"Watch it!" Aster hissed soon after. He swallowed as soon as he saw Blossom though, frozen in the presence of her. "Oh, Bloss!" he exclaimed.

"Morning, Asty!" Blossom gleamed her eyes while greeting. The phrase reminded Bruno of the first time he met the wretched foreigner, even while he was dizzy from the collision with him.

Aster's warm expression immediately chilled to being icy as he glared at Bruno with narrow eyes. He puffed his jacket as if he was a gangster. "So, you're really dating Bruno, huh?" he sneered at Blossom, not even looking at her, only his purple-tinted pupils doing the work.

The girl unwillingly nodded. "What's wrong with that?" she murmured. As the pair made eye contact, Blossom shivered, making whinnies that frightened Bruno who was beside her.

"He's a Class 2 member. You're from Class 3—"

"Asty, we're from different classes but we're best friends," Blossom instantly argued. For a second, Bruno could spot an air, a nerve of grief in Aster as his head slightly ducked down. He muttered something as well, but it was too faint to be interpreted.

"Bruno is different," the boy went on to snarl further. "You know what he did."

Yet again, the newcomer had heard that sentence for the umpteenth time by now. He couldn't quit questioning what it meant, and still, he doesn't know. No matter how many times he asked, he was left with dead

ends. He bet now it'd be the same… And it was as he gave Aster a pleading glance.

"I don't care, Aster," Blossom snapped.

For one last time, Aster hissed, not even giving any words before he ran away, leaving only his back to be seen until he faded away upstairs. Blossom stammered, losing her grip on herself. It was clear she wanted to continue speaking earlier, but sadly, it was all lost.

"What's wrong with him? What is it about me?" Bruno asked.

There was a trench-like ache in her cracking voice. It sounded nothing like she usually does with her high-pitched and sweet voice. Instead, it was raspy. "He'd hate me if I told you. Alex would too."

Bruno wished he could say he had enough of this nonsense about him. He really did, he just wanted to know, he'll be left in the dark forever, he supposed. This was also when he realized he should've brought up the book to Aster, although at the same time, he would be too afraid too if he had even a sliver of an opportunity.

Before anything more was done, a special someone appeared right behind the newcomer. His spine crackled as melodies sprinkled on his back.

"Hello!" it sung.

When Bruno turned back, he found the familiar face of…

"Poppy!" he exclaimed. It's true: it's Poppy Kowalski, one of the girls Bruno had to question back on the first day about the sparring teachers. What he didn't remember for a while is that they both planned to hang out the following day. Of course, it didn't happen, but it could've when they returned. Bruno felt like an idiot for this, even more so since he quite liked Poppy.

Blossom gasped, then instantly beamed at her. "Hi Poppy!" she greeted blissfully.

“Blossom, you’re hanging out with him?” Poppy asked.

The girl nodded. “I didn’t even know you met Bruno though.”

“Of course we did meet, Blossom. She was one of your classmates who last saw the Lanes before they disappeared. I escaped math class just to ask them!” Bruno explained.

Jaw-dropped, Blossom glanced around, finally fixing her gaze on her classmate who was grinning at this point and shrugged. “We asked to meet?” Poppy prompted.

Bruno blinked awkwardly as the girl inched closer to him to the point where their chests nearly touched. It made him sweat in not only anxiety but also in the same feeling that he had when he was with Blossom on the bus. The fact that his cheeks turned scarlet and revealed his freckles made his friend huff and turned her head away.

“We did,” murmured Bruno. Once he noticed how tense Blossom appeared to be, though, he softly shoves Poppy away. “I’m sorry, I forgot.”

“It’s ok. It happens to everyone!” the redhead smirked. “So, do you want to hang out…?”

Bruno hesitated though, constantly glancing at Blossom. He could feel her spirits getting down and her heart telling her to go to her old friend. After how much it irked him, Bruno shivered until he finally confessed, “No.” At that, Poppy turned subtly wilted. Before she could ask him why, the boy answered, “I’m sorry, I’m just busy investigating what happened to my classmate. We can still hang out as good friends though!” He felt obligated to add how they’re friends to lighten up Blossom. He could even tell Poppy was a bit peeved about that.

“Alright, if that’s your choice,” Poppy said, defeated and resigned to that fact. “Good luck on finding your classmate.”

As Poppy walked away and showed her back like Aster, Bruno could see her flowy, fiery hair that bounced as she went. Her blazing outfit

that matched her hair, her pale skin that he had bet was softer than Blossom's. Now he was beginning to long for her despite his rejection.

In the middle of the yearnful moment, Blossom popped up to the side of Bruno's view, where he immediately swung his head to stare at her. She asked, harsher than usual, "Why did you reject her offer? Don't you love her? I can tell you do."

"Oh, Blossom," Bruno tenderly started, "my heart is with you and you only." He didn't have the heart to admit that was a half-truth though.

"Really?" the tall girl beamed, her eyes shining with adoration.

"Of course," assured the lovestruck boy.

As their gazes fixed on each other, Bruno forgot about how he possibly broke the heart of Poppy. It's true that he fancied her, but he also couldn't deny that he liked the girl in front of him too, even if it was much less so than the other.

The mildness of the moment was interrupted by Blossom suddenly talking again. "Come on, let's head to class. You got to tell Alex about the book," she told him.

Bruno frowned, but he spoke in a tone that didn't suggest any negativity burning inside. "Right," he muttered as he dipped his head.

Blossom passed him, causing him to follow her soon after. She didn't even seem to look at him, only focusing on getting up. When they had a fork in the path, she continued to pad towards her class. Bruno took one more longing look before entering his class reluctantly.

As Bruno opened the door, he was almost hit by another paper airplane, but this time sent by Winnie. He luckily dodged it by ducking. Once he finally got to firmly stand though, he stared at the girl with narrow eyes, making her chuckle in quiet shame and sliding down.

Abruptly, Maverick crackled a greeting. “Hey, Bruno!” The newcomer twisted to look at his classmate. “Sorry for that! I just taught everyone here the magic of…”

“Paper airplanes!” Mandy yelped, rising from hiding under her table to suddenly toss one of her own at Bruno. This time, it nearly knocked his baseball cap away!

Bruno grunted. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“Well, Renard used to do this all the time back then. We just want to fill his blank space,” Bella answered with her posh accent.

“Maybe you could fill the blank space with something different?” hissed Bruno slowly. That was one part of Renard Bruno remembered not liking from the first day alone…

His classmates collectively shrugged, causing him to sigh. Either way, he bound up to his seat and dropped down. His former grimace flipped upside down to that of a comforting smile until it, yet again, turned down the moment he caught sight of Alex, his partner.

“Good morning, Bruno,” Alex greeted, not even looking at him.

Reluctantly, Bruno answered, “Good morning.” He tried not to scoff, but he couldn’t help himself.

“So… Dunkel… Do you still think he’s hiding something?”

Bruno paused right after his friend stopped speaking. Still, there was no eye contact with him, his stern face still facing Sarah. Carly wasn’t even present yet since she and her mother, who is the teacher, Garcia, tend to be late. His eyes glimmered in that sentiment.

“I don’t know, Alex,” he sadly responded.

Alex scoffed unwittingly. “Of course you don’t.” He finally eyed his partner, but this time, he gave the most searing glare he could’ve had to the young man. “If I don’t know something, then you won’t either.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Bruno hissed.

“You’re enough of an idiot to think that you can write in some dusty old book,” scorned Alex, fire blazing out of his every word.

A rough huff came from the newcomer; his eyelids drooped to the middle as agony had tipped him off, but he still stayed silent. Soon enough, his partner went on to look away, staring blankly at the dry concrete wall like he once did.

Once Bruno gripped himself to the ground, he felt himself losing his mind, especially as he kept on reiterating to himself, begging himself, to show the peculiar book to Alex. Yet, no matter the amount of nagging, he couldn’t get himself to even make a straight expression at his partner without flinching.

Agony drowned him to the point where all he could do was stare dryly at his faux-wooden table, while he was listening to his heart pleading for answers to be given. But it was too late once the teacher stepped into the room alongside Carly.

Those two greeting words marked the death of a possible conversation. “Good morning, students!” Garcia beamed.

The happiness wasn’t the same on Bruno. Instead, all he could feel was misery that he had to bottle up. If he didn’t, what would Alex do? He knew the result wouldn’t be pretty no matter what he did.

At least he found solace in the unlikeliest friend he’d least expect to have upon entering the school: Blossom Sakura. Although she was more than a friend—she was his girl.

Chapter 17

Fatherly Advice

Despite the harrowing moment, time still has to go on. The clock keeps ticking, the bells keep ringing, students will keep shuffling their books. It only got to swimming class where Bruno felt like time was slowing down. It was a relief, yet at the same time, he did quite enjoy the fast pace of school. After all, he did want to leave.

Nonetheless, he still entered the pool with his classmates, all eager for the class that was about to come. Right in front of them was Duke Wilson, Alex's father and their coach.

"Greetings, children!" he grinned.

He emerged shortly from the crystal water pool, rimmed with white plastic. Unlike Alex, Duke had wispy brown hair that resembled a pompadour cut, although it was wet, smooth and flopped down as he resurfaced. It flowed as if it had frozen in the middle of blowing wind. The only traits he and his son share are their skin tones and their hazel eyes. He wore an orange jacket over a black and red swimsuit.

"Hey Mr. Wilson!" some of the students responded.

Bruno examined the room, even if he had been there twice or thrice by then. It was much sleeker than the rest of the school. There were tiled walls dressed in gray, silky windows with no cracks, and marble-looking ground that was obviously rough to avoid any slipping. To the right was a wall that divided the senior and junior pools.

The pool itself, despite how modern and blue it was, terrified Bruno. It reminded him of when Alex shoved him into it. He would've died if it wasn't for Duke saving him. Nonetheless, he did power through it before. This period can't be any different.

“I see you still aren’t ready, so just head to your respective locker rooms and come back,” Duke told the teenagers.

And so, everyone followed. There was a room underground with descending stairs, one for each gender. The boys were to the left while girls were to the right slightly before the divide between junior and senior pools starts. Everyone shuffled around until finally; they climbed up to reveal themselves in their swimsuits, although Bruno was only wearing blue shorts like he always does.

“That was quick,” commented the coach faintly.

The students all lined up in a circle around the man, all eagerly staring at him. They were dogs waiting for an order from their owner.

“So, continue practicing what you were doing last week,” he blathered after pausing to think. Then, he went on to ask Max’s side, “Renard still isn’t here, by the way?”

Max shook his head. When Bruno turned to him, he noticed that the robot actually didn’t even dress up, and then he realized: Max wasn’t even really swimming on the first day, or any other swimming lesson. It made sense, of course, since any form of electronics can’t survive in water. Still, he was shocked how he only knew this after two weeks.

“That’s concerning,” sighed Duke.

“It is, but don’t worry! Me, your son, and the rest of your students will figure things out!” Bruno assured.

But Duke shuddered, his eyes suddenly darting down. “That’s good, but you see: The authorities were called… They still found nothing, at least I think so considering the fact that the boy isn’t here.”

“The authorities do nothing,” scoffed Alex. “I mean, there are missing students everyday all across America nowadays because of Darkeners.”

“Son, do you really think we should do nothing about it? I thought I taught you better!” Duke hissed.

As soon as the man started to raise his voice, the remaining students tried to not roll their eyes or fold their arms, all in the boredom of the moment. They had heard the kin argue too many times now. So, they just dismissed themselves and headed onto the pool. “Be careful,” warned Duke, only his voice being heard to everyone but Bruno and Alex, who were waiting for his next word to the latter.

Duke stared deeply at Alex. “Stop wasting time bickering with me and go help paddle your friend.” It seemed he also had enough, yet his son still had too much energy left to blabber with his father. Not like it fazed Bruno. His leader already had done this with him countless times.

Surprisingly enough though, Alex stood still, making the newcomer believe he would hold his grip and continue to spit back, but he didn’t. Instead, he relaxed his muscles and resigned himself from the conversation. He sighed and bounded backwards to the trim of the pool. Bruno held one last gaze at the lanky, middle-aged man. Finally, he also turned back and followed his friend.

Once they arrived at the rim of the pool, Bruno sat as steadily as he could until his feet finally dipped into the water, only his blue pants touched the water. He turned around to stare at Alex, who was gazing blankly ahead of him. He looked quite different without glasses.

“What’s the matter?” Bruno asked.

Alex continued to stare at their classmates until he shook his head. “Nothing,” he muttered. “I’m still surprised you’re not traumatized…”

To the leader’s surprise, Bruno snickered and almost snorted out while laughing. “Come on! Of course I’m traumatized!” His voice continued to get much scruffier. “But you know what? I’m good at acting

like I'm not." His increasing cacophony lowered to a silent melody though. "I guess that's the only strange thing about me."

"Bruno, you're no ordinary kid," scoffed Alex.

That caused the newcomer to beam, his hair fuzzing in excitement. "Really?" His heart warmed in the thought that someone thought of him differently, especially Alex. However, his heart plummeted the moment the leader spoke once more.

"Not ordinary in a good way… There's something about you, but I can't say it," Alex whispered.

"Is it… about why you and the others scorn me?" Bruno asked. No answer came about though, just the silent, yet deadly glare from the stern genius towering over the freckled boy. It made Bruno dip his head and only stare blankly at the free-flowing blue beneath him.

Anguished, Alex took a few steps away from Bruno and then launched inside, splashing his partner slightly. Suddenly, someone else too made the boy wet…

"Peek-a-boo!" Nadia harmonized.

"Mother!" Bruno exclaimed. "Did you have to do that?"

With the girl brought Bella, who shared the mischievous grin of her friend beside her. Weirdly, they didn't proceed to say anything after, Nadia just giving her crush an erotic gaze, which certainly made him uncomfortable. "Nadia…" Burno breathed slowly. He knew exactly what she was up to the moment she started staring at him. He bet that she wanted to flirt with him!

"It's nothing, Bruno," Nadia murmured.

Soon enough, Bella leaned to her friend and whispered into her ear, then pointed at Maverick who was right behind them. They giggled and advanced towards him, paddling to get to him. Bruno had a deep sigh of

relief, though he also guessed that Bella wished to avoid any more awkward moments from Nadia.

Now Bruno won't stop watching Alex swimming through the pool He was just as nimble as he was on the first day and all the lessons succeeding it. Yet the newcomer couldn't ignore how Alex was much better than him, not only at swimming, but just about at everything. He wouldn't be surprised if he was better at writing a whole novel than him.

For many heartbeats, Bruno had hoped that his friend in yellow pants would begin to talk to him. Sadly, he didn't. All he did was focus on his butterflies and trying to stay afloat. However, Bruno also couldn't ignore something lingering and yelling in his brain: The book. Deep down, that was what he aimed to do the whole day, it's just that he was too much of a coward to do anything. Maybe that could change this lesson.

So, with his courage energizing him, he lifted from the ground and skedaddled to the locker room, swiftly emerging from it with his red backpack. It shook Duke.

"Bruno? Did you even swim?" the coach asked while Bruno pulled out the book. It made the man flinch even further. "What the?"

"Sorry, I just need to tell your son something," Bruno answered.

"Okay… but promise me you'll swim later, alright?"

Bruno nodded along to the middle-aged person's words. Instantly after, he dropped the book on a bench a foot away from the pool and leaped in. Once he resurfaced, he found Alex still circling around, but now he was on the way like a traffic cone to a car. And like it, he managed to stop his partner, although not without them crashing into each other!

Their classmates gasped, but soon continued their work, trying to ignore the leers from Alex to them. That leer projected onto Bruno later, jerking him. "What are you doing? Get out of my way!" he roared.

“Apologies,” Bruno started, “I just had to get you to stop though.”

“Stop for what?” Alex hissed, his head ducking while his chest heaved in frustration. “Is what you’re going to say really that important?”

“Of course!” Bruno interjected. His heart had begun to fly. His confidence was about to shake. He could even feel his senses starting to falter.

Alex inched closer to Bruno, removing any comfort from the situation, as if there were any from the start. The poor newcomer had to jump into the very pool that could’ve killed him just to send a message! “Then what is it?” It was clear that the leader’s patience was waning.

Bruno gestured with his thumb behind. “We have to talk on ground…”

Alex sighed. “Alright.”

The pair creeped out of the blue and headed towards where Bruno left the book, on that very faux-marble bench. Once they reached the place, Bruno sat down and sweated at the thought of Alex knowing what he was about to say. It irked him so much that he trembled, shaking like a hungry cat. He wasn’t feeling the cold of the fresh pool, rather the raw fear of speaking to someone he sees everyday.

“What is it, Bruno?” Alex snarled.

Clumsily, and shakily, Bruno lifted the book. He didn’t show his eyes at all, his head constantly ducked downwards, just staring at his wet feet. The book strangely didn’t get infected by the water. It stayed dry.

At that, Alex stared, puzzled at what he was seeing. “Another dusty old book?” he spat.

“No!” Bruno yelled back, finally looking at his friend.

After silence, Alex examined it further, snatching it from the grip of his partner. He continued staring at it. Before he was about to say

anything though, a man popped out of nowhere, and it wasn't only him: a younger boy did too.

It was Duke, seemingly returning from something as he rushed out of the door with a kid. The child in question was someone Bruno recognized before. Initially, he couldn't put a finger on it, but after some time, he guessed it was August, Alex's brother who he saw briefly in PE sometime last week. Although he had been in school for a while and August even participated in the basketball games Bruno did, he really didn't get the chance to talk to him. This could be a good opportunity.

Alex was the first to jolt. "Oh my god! August, what are you doing here? And dad?"

"Sorry, son! I let August out of class so I can tell both of you that we're going home early, like, right after this period. I'm going to let your brother be here so he can relax for a bit—a treat from me!" Duke excitedly explained, sunshine beaming out of face.

However, Alex didn't seem so phased. His arms drooped straight and his expression did the same. "Okay…" he muttered.

August soon padded next to his father and grinned at Bruno. He had a darker shade of brown to his eyes than his other kin. Must've gotten that from his mother. "You must be Bruno!" August smiled. There was a softness in his voice that warmed the newcomer. It was unlike his brother.

"I am!" Bruno confirmed.

"Nice to meet you! Alex talks about you, like, all the time," August spoke out loud, flinching his older sibling into a frozen state until he thawed himself from his burning rage. Interjecting anything the leader could say, Bruno responded curiously. "Really?"

Suddenly, his head spun to his friend, who stared back at him with the same fury as before. "I do not!" His cheeks flushed.

August rolled his eyes and chuckled. “You silly guy.” The joke didn’t amuse Alex, instead it just tethered him to earth again as he relaxed. “Well, I hope to see you again, Bruno! You seem like a cool guy. I mean, you found the sparring teachers!”

“Thanks. August, right?” Bruno asked, ignoring the bored elephant beside him. The younger brother nodded, then was patted on his blonde hair by his father. While they were chatting, Alex was skimming through the book. It only took him a bit until he gasped visibly and yelled at his partner.

“I still don’t understand, Bruno. How is this book going to help with the investigation? It’s just Dusk and Dawn, A stupid romantic fantasy book!” snarled Alex, scaring August into a sudden jump and eyed Bruno with shrunken pupils, who was giving his brother a glare.

“Alex, flip to the first and last pages and you’ll see,” Bruno whispered, gloom flooding over every sense. At the same time as Alex turning the book upside down and around, the ninth grader smirked and snickered. “Why do you have some thirty-year-old Dusk and Dawn book anyways?” he cracked at Bruno.

“It’s not a thirty-year-old book. Dusk and Dawn isn’t even that old! It’s just very torn up,” Bruno explained, trying not to raise his voice into a harsher note. He went on. “I found it in Central Park.” His attention was given to his classmate, who was stuck to the last page.

“Tadashi Suzuki,” Alex muttered under his breath. His tone suddenly lifted. “You found it in Central Park, you say?” He blathered more unintelligible words before he spoke clearly again. “Maybe this does have something to do with the investigation…” Had Alex finally given up to reason?

… Maybe that was too much of a wish though.

“Or not… Who’s Richard Winston?!” Alex sneered.

“Do you know?” Bruno asked. “The text is in Tagalog, so I think it’s Aster. He’s Filipino after all.”

“That’s true,” stated Alex. His eyes were glued to the pages the whole time before he finally rose his head to meet Bruno’s brown gaze. “or maybe this is phony.” He suddenly scoffed, scalding the newcomer’s heart. “Either way, I don’t care. This book probably has nothing important.”

“How would you know? You don’t understand Tagalog!”

Bruno was interjected by a yelling Alex, snapping straight at him, flinging the book at the bench at the same time. “Fine! You know, it isn’t only about the content of the book. I honestly could care less about whether or not it’s true. Bruno, I’ve had enough of your shenanigans with Blossom and Aster. I know you’re saying Aster is behind this because you want to see your *pretty* little girlfriend again. Well, *no more*!”

Bruno recoiled, gasping heavily until he levelled himself once more, firmly gripping himself to the wet floor. He didn’t even look at the Wilsons’ flabbergasted faces. All he could see was the narrowed eyes of his partner, who was on thin ice at this point… As if he never was though.

“Excuse me!?” Bruno rasped. His raised voice alerted everyone enough to watch the thrilling soap opera going on. “How do you know I love her!?”

“It’s obvious,” scorned Alex. “I even watched you and her flirt with each other. You even confessed that to me. Do you think I became a leader as a blind guy?”

“You said you didn’t care *multiple* times. Were you just lying to me? To shut me up all those times? You’re so ridiculous, Alex!” Bruno argued back, roaring as a lion. He cracked once more. “Also, I would never let my relationship affect me enough to ruin an investigation for a missing classmate!”

“You seem to be that kind of person. You nearly did that on the first day,” Alex hissed, “and when did I tell you that I didn’t care?”

Bruno was about to explode; his skin turned to scarlet. He was a volcano that was nearly going to show its true fury. However, he ignored the calls in his heart and instead listened to his brain. He breathed in and out and kept himself still.

“You told me when Blossom asked me when we returned to school. You told me when me and her spoke during PE. You—”

“Ok, ok, I get it,” Alex stopped him, retorting in a defeated manner. He seemed embarrassed after noticing his classmates watching. Suddenly though, he lifted himself as he remembered something. “Although… You did promise me that you’ll quit meeting Blossom…” Bruno shook his head. “I also told you that it’s not guaranteed, Alex.” Yet again, the leader returned to his shock of being defeated.

However, he went on. “Still though, I’m sick of you. I’m sick of how you think everyone wants to be your closest, *bestest* friend just on the first month of school!” He spoke in such a sarcastic and babyish way that it irked Bruno into recoiling like a child. “Well, guess what? I’m not that way! You didn’t get that message on the first day… and every other day that follows. I didn’t care, not until now.”

Bruno was feeling so wimpy, he almost curled up into a ball. Those words… They hurt much more than any other ones he said earlier, even the rejection of Blossom, because what was worse than rejection from his best friend about his girlfriend? Rejection from the best friend himself… if he even is his best friend all along. Nonetheless, it was clear that the conversation favored the leader, something Bruno didn’t expect when Alex admitted that he was wrong.

“What are you saying, Alex?” he shakily responded, shriveled in his own abjection. This feeling intensified once he caught the other

students, coach and his leader's brother staring at him, their jaws all dropping. "That… that you don't want to be friends?"

Alex scoffed. His voice lowered to that of a hasty snowstorm. It was almost a faint murmur, but it was too clear for Bruno, sadly. "Were we even friends, Bruno?"

At that, lightning struck on the blue-dressed boy. Bruno had a sword slice through his chest. His heart shattered into a million pieces. His soul wasn't tethered to the Earth anymore, as it floated to his own version of hell. There was a clear devil in Alex's hazel gaze, yet it went over the newcomer's head. His voice was even out, now all he could do was whimper, acting as a stray, boneless dog in the streets.

Alex scoffed harshly, spinning away to not make eye contact with his vice leader anymore. "Father, let's go now. I'm done with this nonsense."

Before Duke was about to speak, obviously in a stern and scolding way, Alex halted him. "I don't care about what you think! I'm going." At that, Duke faltered, leaving his son to head down to the locker room. While he was walking, Bruno could hear a faint mutter from his classmate in yellow shorts. "I was an idiot for thinking you would still choose me, Bruno, but I suppose you really are destined to be with them."

As soon as he was out of sight, the entirety of Class 2 muttered to each other, not even continuing their swim, just having chats. Bruno knew exactly what they were talking about, and it isn't pretty. At the same time, August and Duke turned around from viewing their relative to his partner, who seemed dumbfounded. Luckily, they both had mild faces of sympathy.

"It's alright, Bruno," assured August. "That's just Alex being Alex."

“You mean… he’s always like this?” Bruno rasped.

August made his eyes search around until he spoke. “Well, not *always*, but he has a tendency to act out like now.”

Bruno sighed, distressed over what was going on. He kept watching the stairs to the locker room in case Alex would pop out, but he didn’t, at least not before his brother went on.

“And don’t listen to him! I think you’re cool, and we only know each other for five minutes!” August complimented.

As August said that, Bruno spun his head to smile warmly at him. Comfort did come to his heart, finally. “Thanks,” whispered the newcomer. Duke also bound up closer to his student and mildly spoke to him, wisdom flowing out of his every note.

“Some advice from someone who has experience a breakup: Try to forget about it. Forget about what happened, Bruno. Like my little boy said, Alex tends to be like this and get his… frustrations out in sudden ways. It always stings,” Duke confessed, years of grievances and memories spilled out of his mouth with every syllable he spelled out. “Don’t let him hang over your head.”

“I… Duke…” Bruno murmured shakily, stammering, his mouth twitching in his loss for words. Melancholy grounded him too well. “It’s easier said than done to forget,” he admitted.

He knew the feeling, that feeling of wanting to let go yet he can’t. He knew it all too well thanks to Claire and his old group of friends. At the same time, deep down, he also guessed that Duke thought that it’d be easier for him because he was the one who cheated on Alex’s mother, he already had someone else on his plate to move on to. How would this situation apply to him?

“I get it. Alex couldn’t move on from his old friend, Zina. I must confess that I still love Sophie too, y’know, my boys’ mother? Just take

your time, Bruno. Maybe Alex will even come back, who knows?" Duke told Bruno softly. "Just hold on and focus on the investigation, okay?"

Those last words encouraged Bruno to grin, lifting his head to level with the man, and nod. "Thank you, coach," the boy whispered.

Once that was done, Alex emerged from the stairs, rising to show his dazed head first, then the rest of himself. He finally padded towards his relatives, who also turned around to see the leader with his, although shrimpy on the inside, headstrong stance. He looked like how he normally does, donning the white shirt with a yellow and black dapper vest with a shaded bowtie, and of course, his dandelion beanie.

"Are we going or not?" Alex hissed.

Duke and August exchanged glances. "Son, I said we'd leave after this lesson is over—"

"I'll get to class then," snarled the leader further, instantly rounding up to the door and storming out.

August was shrouded in angst, staring at his feet, while his father glanced at Bruno to ask, "Boy, can you look after the class? I'm going to go now…" Bruno nodded. "Of course. It's my duty, after all." He couldn't say it but, he'd hate to do this task. Really, he only agreed to appease the athletic and limber coach. It worked since Duke smirked back and beckoned August out silently, the two immediately exiting the pool.

Sighing, Bruno gazed slightly at his classmates, who weren't reciprocating, all focusing on swimming. It appeared that they didn't even care if the coach was there. Oh well, not like they were the ones who nearly drowned on the first day.

So, Bruno, heavy at heart, tried to take a couple of steps until he noticed the torn book, sitting on the bench, calling for him to pick it up again. He eventually does. Its mystical appearance meant nothing to the

boy now, not after what just happened. Would it be worth it now to bring this up to Aster if even his partner got worked up? No, it wouldn't.

Instead, Bruno sadly and weepily walked to the locker room underground, aiming to store the book. Once he was done, he rushed out to find his classmates still swimming, much to his relief. Now it was up to him to lead these teens out like a shepherd though. At least there was some time left for the period.

Chapter 18

Stemlung

As the bell rang, the students retreated to class. They found nobody, but they expected Mr. Wayne McRyan to be there very shortly. It was only a matter of time that he does. In the meantime, Bruno landed himself on his seat like his classmates did. However, unlike them, Bruno had a hole in his heart that could only be filled by his partner, the partner that got away.

The moment the newcomer glanced to the wall across him, he found an empty seat that once belonged to his leader. Now there's nothing but the remains of the person he used to know as Alex. Wistfulness loomed over Bruno, being the shadow underneath that doomed him. His lungs could weep as much as his eyes would wish to, that of the Nile River.

His friend just ditched him, right after an argument. They could've worked things out, yet it sadly didn't happen. When Bruno returned his eyes to his front, he instantly ducked down to blankly stare at the wooden table, not even blinking. His thoughts were bombarded by those about the fallout… How he shouldn't have said what he said, and how he shouldn't have told Alex anything about Blossom, even if he didn't in actuality.

… Were they even friends all along? Was Bruno just desperate?

All those questions had to be answered later as soon as Nadia abruptly interrupted his train of thought with a tap on his shoulder. Once Bruno turned around, the girl leaned in closer for a sudden smooch, which made the newcomer instantly flinch back.

"Pain's grin!" he yelped.

Bella chuckled alongside Roselynn and Winnie sneakily in the back. Even Violet appeared to be participating while her partner was chatting with Sheldon to the other side.

“Sorry, Bruno, they just dared me to,” Nadia bellowed, though it was obvious she was lying with the clear redness of her cheeks.

It made her crush arch an eyebrow. “Are you serious?” he hissed. His eyes rolled. “Don’t you know how many times I’ve said no, Nadia? It’s been nearly a decade since you tried to ask me out!”

The girls all recoiled while Nadia began to sweat. Her partner was the first to speak out. “No way! You’ve tried to get together with him since you were little kiddos?”

“Oh, puh-lease!” retorted Nadia, brushing things off. “It’s normal for “kiddos” to fall in love, mind you. You liked that Carl boy for a start.”

Bella flushed her cheeks as the other two girls exchanged glances, then both directed it to the seat two times in front of them. Violet was even starting to try to ignore what was going on by dipping her head down awkwardly. “Usually, we just move on from those crushes,” whispered Roselynn as calmly as ever.

“Sometimes, love at first sight can stick with you!” Nadia harmonized, as if she was proud about the fact that she won’t give up on Bruno despite his many rejections. He much preferred Claire to his tastes, and even people new to him like Poppy and especially Blossom. While this conversation was sort of meaningless, it did distract Bruno enough to briefly forget about Alex. He even expected them to discuss it!

However, the girl talk annoyed him enough to turn around and attempt to leave them to their own devices. It turned out that it was going to happen anyways since that was the second Mr. McRyan entered the room, banging the door open.

Just like before on the first day, in Class 1, Mr. McRyan was brooding and towering over everyone despite being average sized compared to the other teachers. His pale skin shone over the lights the same way as his dark, rectangular glasses that hung over his hooked nose. His short, wolverine and ruffled hair softened as he barged in.

Finally, after standing to stare at his pupils for a bit, he spoke with his raspy, hoarse voice that made him sound like he was ill yet so menacing at the same time. “Good afternoon, students,” McRyan hissed.

The class gulped. “Good afternoon.” They were too freezing to even respond with his name.

McRyan bounded towards the teacher’s table, dropping off all the books he was apparently carrying, all as heavy as bricks. The impact almost made the ground quake. At once, he withdrew all his chalk and began to write something.

“Today, students, we’re going to finally learn about the Stemlung,” McRyan announced.

Bruno recoiled. He remembered the lesson on the first day, how it was about the very plant that nearly bit off a student’s hand. He also recalled that the teacher made a remark to Alex about how he was going to teach this very lesson to Class 2 next time… Was next time really two weeks later? Either way, he was glad he has to endure this today, even if he’s without his closest ally. And even so, the plant wasn’t there with him.

Someone asked the same question, who was Spencer. “Mr. McRyan, where’s the plant?” he asked after his hand was lowered by the biology teacher’s silent orders.

“It’s right…” He paused to unzip his suitcase, then magically ripped the potted plant out of the bag, as if he was magic! Of course, the plant was fairly small despite its badgering demeanor and its lust for biting victims. “It’s this!”

Despite its size, the students collectively jerked back, some nearly falling off their seats with their minds blown and terrified simultaneously. The plant presented itself grandly as a fusion between a bonsai tree and a Venus Flytrap. Skinny as it was, it also appeared vicious, its mouth made of wax always gnawing at the air. It heaved itself from up to down subtly, looking like inhaling and exhaling lungs, which might be a clue to its etymology.

"This here is indeed the Stemlung, the plant said to be the closest to animals and humans. It has the mind of a vicious, cruel wild creature in the jungle while having the intelligent, evolving mind of a person like you and I," McRyan explained, catching a breath in the end. "These plants originated from Brazil and were discovered in the 60's. Since then, it has become a household name and since the 90's, it has become legal in America to own these. Because of its popularity, it has begun to grow in other countries such as West Europe and Southeast Asia, developing new species of their own."

He went on to carefully pet the plant as if it was a dog, which he described it as on the first day when it was domesticated. He was performing witchcraft by avoiding its many thorns. "In New York City, its population is ever-increasing, which is why I must show it."

Suddenly, the teacher added a new, peculiar detail that Bruno didn't hear from the first time he met him. "It's also said that Stemlungs contain a lot of mystical properties. While I am into science and not into that magical mumbo jumbo." Strangely enough, Bruno saw a slight glimmer in the man's eyes that suggested… deceit? Anyhow, he continued to focus. "I must believe it since it does seem to be very strange."

Abruptly, Mr. McRyan picked out a random leaf next to the soil, straddling over the plant somehow. There was no resistance from the Stemlung, which was even stranger. Seems like it loved the teacher too

much. At once, McRyan showed the leaf off and that's when the students all saw it flashing rainbow faintly in the fluorescent light. Their jaws widened.

"*This* is one piece of evidence," declared McRyan.

Their shock turned to that of curious and jubilant awe, everyone trying to lean closer to examine it. Sadly, the teacher lowered it and left it on his desk. He carried on explaining, "Anyhow, this plant sure is an interesting one, and I hope you all love it as much as I do! This thing used to grow all over my neighborhood once upon a time."

Soon enough, the spiky-haired man hovered the pot over, flying it as he walked to Bruno's seat, suddenly dropping it on his table, scaring him to the point where he dragged himself and his chair an inch away.

"Oh, don't be a coward!" spat McRyan as he pushed the biting plant closer. It just wished to rip the newcomer's face off—he could tell. So, he responded, spluttering. "Mr. McRyan, I—"

"You did well with it in Class 1, so show your classmates how you did it! After all, they're your friends, aren't they?" As alluring as McRyan's voice got, he wasn't entirely convinced, not until the middle-aged man gave one more searing glare with shrunken pupils. It jumped Bruno into shrieking his chair as he gripped the pot and nodded.

"Good!" grinned McRyan.

Instantly, everyone in Bruno's vicinity watched carefully, their eyes constantly peeled as the boy had started to drag the pot closer to examine it. After he tried to find the approximate location of where he first pet it, he drew his hand closer and finally managed to touch it, feeling the familiar silky skin of its stem, ignoring its thorns. He repeated it as if he was cooking something that he hadn't made in ages.

The trap of the Stemlung flowed like water, even shivering in warmth from the newcomer.

“Aww!” drawled Violet.

Carly and Sarah were the ones to stare at it the most, having eager eyes hungry to copy what Bruno did. “Teach, can I pet it next!?” Carly pleaded.

“No,” harshly denied McRyan in a snap, which jumped the little girls into curling on their chairs. “On the first day, a student nearly lost his hand because I made him touch it with no experience. After complaints from the principal, I knew I had to give this job exclusively to Bruno.” He sounded quite hesitant and divisive on the inside when explaining that, like he didn’t even choose to do this. Technically, he was inadvertently saying that he wasn’t. Instead, he was just being given enough bad of a rap to brute force him into changing the rules.

Despite the obvious lying, Bruno’s classmates appeared to have ate it up as they collectively nodded their head. Their eyes twisted from gazing at their teacher to their newest member.

“Then how can you pet it, Bruno!?” Sheldon eagerly asked.

“We need to know!” added Maverick.

“I bet you just need to call for it and pretend it’s a dog,” Craig chortled quietly.

Bruno attempted to chuckle along, but he couldn’t push himself to. Instead, he managed to lift himself enough to speak. At first, he was about to stammer, but finally, he grounded himself. “Just carefully touch its back, that’s all. It cannot turn its head around, see?” He slightly slid himself back to showcase it clearly, awing everyone around him. “Be very gentle with the thorns too. There *are* gaps in between, actually.”

All he heard soon after were oohs and ahhs, which absolutely flattered him to the point where his cheeks bursted in rose. Even McRyan’s grin grew wide, wide enough to reach from both ends of his face. That final approval energized Bruno.

“And I thought this thing was scary!” commented Mandy

“I totally wasn’t afraid at all,” Riley bragged falsely as he quivered.

More and more murmurs echoed from all across the room. It bothered McRyan enough for him to implode on himself and act up. He was originally standing somewhat far to allow his pupils to examine the Stemlung. However, he soon lunged at Bruno’s table and snatched the pot right off it, keeping a distance from the now pinching trap.

“Ok, let’s not have *too* much fun,” he groaned. Certainly was déjà vu to hear that from the teacher, except he seemed a lot more aggressive than he was with Class 1.

While McRyan showed his warm heart, only remotely, he instantly slashed that identity of him to show his typical icy one. The part Bruno that he knew was McRyan’s true version of himself. He had to admit it.

As the students moaned in depression, they turned away from the teacher to either stare at each other or at the ground. At the same time, McRyan smirked at Bruno, taunting him in some strange, non-verbal way. It was effective since it shuddered the newcomer, turning him into a sheep.

“Uhm, are we… going to do anything else?” stuttered Bruno.

McRyan shook his head profusely. “This went better than Class 1,” he admitted, “and the other classes. I’m happy for that.”

Bruno guessed that they all went wrong because those complaints didn’t come until literally a day or so ago, either that, or McRyan really didn’t care for the other classes enough to implement a new rule.

Suddenly, he went on to ask, “Where’s Alex, by the way?”

“He went home just last period,” Bruno muttered.

The biology teacher sighed, his raspy voice attempting to clear itself out, yet whatever it was couldn’t escape his throat. “What a shame. You know, if he’s here, I’d rather give the plant to him, although he did cause

enough trouble to get into detention on the first day alone… Was that your doing, Bruno?"

It stumped the newcomer into flinching. He almost fell off his seat and his eyes could feel itself popping out in shock. His heart and soul left his body. "No!" he immediately denied, bringing himself back to reality following the single word that belted out. "Look, Alex pushed me into the water, then I tried to defend him and—"

"He pushed you into the pool?" snarled McRyan as he heaved his head. "That's insane."

Abruptly, Nadia interrupted to answer back. "It's true! The entire class saw it!" When Bruno and the lanky man turned around, they found all the girls nodding. Awkwardly after, the pair spun around to face each other once more, the other teens doing the same as they continue mingling.

"But why would Alex do such a thing? He's such a smart student," McRyan wallowed, his mouth twitching as his shallow, hoarse voice boomed into Bruno's ears.

"I don't know," Bruno stated. "Also, he just broke my heart. I don't think his intelligence really means anything, Mr. McRyan." Suddenly, he held himself back, choking himself to quit talking. "But I'm getting ahead of myself." McRyan raised an eyebrow though, gazing in a riddled manner to the young man.

Bruno could guess that he was about to ask a question, but he replaced it with silent eyes and him approaching his desk. He drew out something new from his little case: a stack of papers. As he flopped it on the table, everyone noticed and gasped.

"Now, I'm going to hand you all this worksheet. It's not difficult, just write down what you observed, that's all," announced McRyan.

As soon as he finished that sentence, he started to pad towards every student in the room, providing each with the sheet, including Bruno. Once

he did receive it, he blankly stared at the white rectangle in front, sleeping on the desk, silently calling for interaction from Bruno, a sign of life. After a few moments, when Bruno noticed his classmates were all getting it, he started to open his pen. Swiftly, he went on to nimbly jot down all he knew about Stemlungs.

Time passed at the snap of a finger as the bell rang, which means it's the end of the school day. Finally. Bruno felt like it took a century for it to finish. If it had gone on for longer, he would die of his sorrow.

The second the bell started a choir, the students threw everything they had into their bags and skedaddled out, Bruno attempting to follow them. However, he soon was abruptly halted by McRyan, who called him from afar, still having his raspy voice that somehow wasn't muffled over the cacophony of laughing children. Luckily for him, Bruno didn't actually get out of class, still standing at the door. He turned back.

"Bruno, I've heard of what's going on," McRyan started while finishing keeping the Stemlung pot still.

"About Renard?" the newcomer asked.

McRyan sluggishly nodded. "I want to help."

"Oh? You suddenly want to help?" scoffed Bruno, his lips trying its best not to curl and copy the appearance of the teacher in front.

"What's wrong with a bit of late help?" snarled McRyan back, rounding up on the boy. "It took me a while to figure out a way to help anyways."

Bruno stopped turning his head around, now positioning himself firmly on the floor. He ignored the chattering in the background that riddled his ears, the chants of vivacious students yearning to get out. "Well, what is it?" he sternly grilled the man.

Soon enough, McRyan took a pause to spin around and gather something out of his giggling bag. It trickled in the sense of its owner trying to find something until he did. Bruno couldn't see it, but he did manage to bring something. As he turned around, it was revealed to be a pile of rotten green mush, lying dead on the teacher's palm.

Bruno flinched, recoiling and appalled in its pungent appearance. Was the biology teacher seriously showing the poor new kid to the school his extra pack of chemical goo, or worse, a sack of giant phlegm?

"What… What is that!?" bellowed Bruno. He continued to silently whoop in even more disdain for the foul object. At least it didn't smell bad or even held the scent of anything.

McRyan snapped, scorning harshly as he drew back the thing slightly away from the teen. "Don't you know anything, Bruno?"

Bruno sighed, guessing a rant would be incoming. However, that didn't happen. Instead, McRyan went on to explain calmly, as if the thought of helping another student did genuinely warm his heart enough to make him act differently.

"This is Stemlung bile," McRyan said, presenting it once more.

It certainly didn't stop the teen from flinching. As a matter of fact, it made him quake further! "Stemlung *bile*? Plants can vomit now!?" he screeched, confusion now ruminating through the room out of his brain. Even the Stemlung reacted as its pinching traps extended to watch what was going on.

McRyan instantly flung his available arm to silence his student. Frustration engulfed his face, finally showing how he was truly like to Bruno. His teeth grinded while his muscles were tilted. "Quit making so much noise! You're going to cause a ruckus among your friends!" hissed McRyan as quietly as he could.

Once he let go of Bruno's mouth, he kept himself still, now only silently gazing at his biology teacher, his eyes begging for clarity.

"Just take this. It'll help you in your investigation," McRyan insisted. Without any words, he handed the bile to Bruno, passing from his palm to the younger one. Awkwardly, Bruno stared at it as if it was a baby alien. He could feel how slimy and adhesive it was. Despite what was said, Bruno lifted his head slightly to only allow his pupils to glance at the towering, wolverine-haired teacher who was straightening his tie.

As their eyes met, McRyan could tell that Bruno had that look that suggested he thought he was a lunatic. "Seriously?" Bruno uttered, though it only echoed in his mind. All he did was stare strikingly at the man until he scoffed. "Trust me," he sneered, somehow attempting to reassure the boy. "You'll see how it'll help."

"Are you saying you know what happened?" Bruno questioned.

McRyan jumped, then immediately shook his head, though it was obvious that there was a nerve inside him that yelled otherwise. That cried the truth. "No, I don't." After a moment, he recollected himself, dropping his every muscle, letting gravity take over him, only his will to stand letting him stay up. "I'm just making up theories. I want to know if it's true, that's all."

As blatant as it was that he was bluffing, Bruno brushed over it. He spat out one last "tch" then an "Alright then. I'll go" before he turned back and padded away, hoping in every sense that he didn't miss the bus. Deep down, he did want to continue, but would it be worth it if he went home walking?

Chapter 19

Stuck on You

As Wednesday dawned, so did the next school day. Like always, like any other ordinary day, Bruno was on the bus, sitting next to Blossom, although the air was different. Since the newcomer explained everything to her, she was on the edge about the bile Bruno received.

Blossom's wide eyes shone further, in awe of the green goo still on Bruno's palm, jiggling in the mere movement of the bus.

"So you're saying that this thing is going to help us?!" she yelped, though trying to lower it and immediately biting her tongue after. She even flinched as she caught Bruno's bored gaze.

"Yeah," muttered Bruno. "I literally told you that yesterday."

"Sorry, I just can't wrap my head around that!" Blossom beamed.

At that, Bruno made his head duck to examine the gunk again. Unexpectedly, the more he stared at it, the worse it looked. Before, it was simply a pile of vomit-colored, phlegm-like substance that was called a Stemlung bile. Now, in his wild imagination, it was the blob of excess liver fluid… Which it technically is but draining that thought in made Bruno realize how vile it truly is. He even wondered if there were any parts of his own body that were as revolting as that thing.

"I… can't blame you," he drew out, his voice scratching as it was choking, trying not to puke. "It does look weird."

Finally, Bruno snapped and slapped the bile back into his bag's front zip, trying to forget about its existence. It seemed to work for Blossom as her face relaxed once more. Unfortunately, it wasn't the same for Bruno, mostly because he could find its putty-like remains on his hand.

Blossom, putting aside what she just witnessed, recollected herself to ask Bruno, “You think maybe Alex would know what it does and why Mr. McRyan gave you it?”

Bruno paused immediately, going from eyeing the slime to Blossom, widening it as it was on the brink of tears. However, he just choke himself and recoiled before fully being able to speak. “I… I can’t talk to Alex,” he spluttered softly.

“Why not?” Blossom asked in the same mild melody. “He’s your best friend, isn’t he?”

The agony of the memory hurt him. It was a scorpion stinging every cell of his skin, his body twitched amid the chaos that his brain put him through. The words echoed in Bruno’s mind, his hollow space being a cave. Not only was he frozen, but time too. He even felt like it rewound to that very moment Alex declared the very words that bashed at their supposed friendship… Their false friendship. As throbbed as his pride was, he managed to ground himself back to reality, back to the present, where Blossom was there, the only participant in the active investigation to still be there for him. A level of comfort was there, but at the same time, he’d much prefer it if he also had Alex and, daresay, Aster around too.

“He never was my friend…” Bruno started faintly, his head dipping in sorrow. “At least… I don’t think so.”

“Excuse me?” spluttered Blossom, jerking back.

“Blossom, I tried to tell him about the Dusk and Dawn copy yesterday. He… He really got mad at me,” Bruno shakily told her, almost choking at every word, drawing out every vowel. “He doesn’t like how we’re dating.”

The last statement broadened Blossom’s eyes into circles. “Now that’s petty!” she commented under her breath. She went on to chuckle though. “But that’s Alex for you.”

Despite the joy emitting from the girl's voice, Bruno wasn't infected by it. Instead, all he felt was the emptiness that came with any grief that follows a hard day. But it wasn't only a hard day for the newcomer—no, it was more than that. It was harrowing to a high degree.

All the poor boy could do was shiver and quiver in his seat, trembling over the memory of what just happened, and how Blossom was trying to rub salt in the wound. Although it didn't seem to be intentional. Her ringing laughter halted immediately after she noticed the gloom in her friend's brown eyes.

When their gazes got fixed on each other, Blossom had that same glimmer that allured Bruno a week ago. "Bruno… I'm so sorry for this…" she murmured, her voice growing tender and fragile. Sympathy poured out of every letter like a waterfall. Her dam of bliss was torn down.

Bruno twitched slightly. "Don't be. I'm an idiot. I am always the idiot," he retorted, partially to himself.

However, Blossom scoffed and huffed a bit. "You're not an idiot," she firmly stated. "What, am I in love with an idiot then?" That sarcastic sentence was followed by a chortle, even some snorting. "You're *crazy*." The laughter did encourage Bruno to chuckle along, though sadly, he didn't have much energy to carry himself to even smile.

"I'm anything but crazy. I'm just… Bruno," he quietly wallowed.

"Don't look at yourself that way. I mean, who cares what anyone thinks? Who cares what Alex, and Aster, says? I don't. They're too hurt by their pasts to listen to," Blossom comforted, her sweet vocals softening Bruno to a point where his muscles fainted.

"They are?" Bruno muttered.

"It's a long story," Blossom grinned awkwardly.

"Well… I'm glad you think differently about me," the newcomer smiled back warmly.

“Of course I do! If you’re feeling lost, you’ve got me… and your classmates… and the other friends I saw you make here! We don’t need Aster and Alex,” Blossom told her shrimpy friend who was deflated at this point. However, Bruno managed to push himself into intensity. His tenacious eyes blazed at his peer.

“Thanks, but we do need them,” he declared solidly. “After all, they were the ones to make a deal.”

“Oh right. That,” Blossom blathered in single sentences, realizing what she made wrong.

“And don’t forget: Alex is my seat partner. We’re supposed to be leaders together,” Bruno told his stunned friend. “I’m going to try to work things out with him.”

But there appeared to be something else in the air, something more. Bruno could see it in Blossom’s eyes. It was likely of sorrow and despair, maybe even a spice of desperation sprinkled in. “If he’s upset with our relationship, then how you going to do that?” she asked softly.

Bruno paused. That was a question with no answer from his heart. He had to be honest, and sadly honest. “I don’t know…” he murmured.

The girl suddenly lit up, having an idea sparking her soul. She even gasped boomingly. “You can brawl him, Bruno!” exclaimed Blossom, her mouth gaping as she believes in the brilliance of the idea. However, Bruno had a spasm, flailing his arms briefly before he set himself solidly on the low-quality bus chair. “No! I’ll never fight someone unless it’s for self-defense!” he argued.

Blossom had a wide smirk though. It was that of a mischievous elf. “Pacifist,” she taunted jokingly.

Knowing the sarcasm, Bruno chuckled slightly, with a few coughs from his throat. “Come on, you know me,” he responded with a raspier voice than before.

“It’s alright if you want to talk to him… But if it doesn’t work out, you know what to do!” Blossom said aggressively.

After a slight shove from the girl, Bruno chortled quietly. Soon enough, his mind drifted off to another realm, another train of thought. One that may or may not be related to the conversation as of now, but what his heart always wanted to say the entire time. “Well, even if we’re not supposed to be together, I’ll still like you. You’re much more understanding of me than Alex will ever be.”

His head that was once gazing at the ground, now slowly lifted. As he steadily elevated his head, he noticed the bright eyes of Blossom, still shaded with pink, but now having a huge tint of white glazed over. It shimmered greatly while her eyes flushed in the same rosy tint. Once their eyes met, Blossom instantly ducked in flattery.

“Oh, Bruno,” she whispered. As she shook away her feelings for a moment, she turned around to peer at Bruno again. “Speaking of boys, I want to do something with Aster.”

Yet again, Bruno’s mind wandered somewhere else. “Have you told him anything about the book?” he asked.

The girl shook her head profusely. “I tried, but you see, he was too busy with… something else.”

Her friend blinked dryly and riddled with questions. After all, her statement could be an implication for just about anything, especially when talking about her long-time friend there. “Like what?” he blabbered.

“You might notice when we come to school,” Blossom started apprehensively. She breathed to continue. “Whenever I was free from class, I would try to look for him, but I’d always find him digging his nose into a book!” Bruno’s face lit up once she said that. “I don’t know which book it was though. His hands always covered the title.”

That enlightenment from Bruno's face washed to that of glumness. There was murky air surrounding him and he certainly doesn't fancy that at all. A form of depravity could be attached to Aster with what Blossom was recounting. A nefarious crime, maybe? He could be reading about the ways to skin Bruno because of whatever sin he committed eons ago or how to rob the president. Either way, anyway, Bruno is in deep trouble. He could feel it right in the trembling of his bones.

His brain got distracted once Blossom spoke again, still winded. "Anyways, I have a way to talk to him, and It's the good old-fashioned Blossom to Aster way!" she gleamed.

It caught Bruno's attention enough to revive from being frozen. He spasmed for a moment before meeting his friend's gaze. "How?"

"By a prank!" beamed Blossom more.

Bruno recoiled, almost touching the window behind him. His muscles tensed. "A prank?" he murmured. "You can join in!" suggested Blossom, her eyes growing and shining further, her arms even stretched to slightly touch Bruno. Suddenly, her voice dropped to a mere whisper as she noticed something about her companion. "I'm being serious Bruno."

"When are we going to prank him?" spluttered Bruno, scratching the remains of his brown hair under his backwards baseball cap.

"Break, duh!" yelped Blossom. "We can't do it now. The teachers are too scattered around, so we might get caught. Plus, I need more time for ideas."

"Okay. I'm looking forward to getting some payback on him!" Bruno agreed after a few minutes of hesitation.

Blossom scoffed though. "He hasn't bullied you that much though."

"It's only because of that deal," spat Bruno back.

"True, and I would stop him!" giggled Blossom.

Bruno blushed instantly. He was certainly quite jolly over what was said, especially by Blossom. She would truly protect that. That is a sign of genuine love. It made his heart flutter much more once he realized that.

Eventually, the bus arrived at school. As soon as it stopped and the doors flung open, everyone escaped the chair-filled tube that is the yellow vehicle. Bruno and Blossom were some of the first as the latter always knew a magical way to get out first.

As they dispersed from the crowd and entered the campus, they got themselves in those familiar halls like always. However, unlike usual, when they arrive to the third floor where they're supposed to be, they found four peculiar teenagers ravaging through the level, scavenging for something.

Curious, the two friends glanced at each other and then approached the scrawniest man out of them. Bruno finally remembers them. The boy they're approaching is Vlad, a member of Team Toxic, the group Blossom is in. Vlad was bent down before noticing the pair. Bruno saw him when he was snuck in by Blue, although he didn't catch his name before.

"Hi Vlad!" Blossom beamed.

"Hey Blossom!" Vlad greeted, looking like he just came back from gardening a palm tree.

When he revealed himself, Bruno got to see the boy clearly. Vlad had two fangs sticking out of his mouth, and they were no sharp canine teeth either. They looked very real. He wore a jet-black jacket over a red and shady-colored shirt, topped with a fiery scarf. His hair was caramel-colored and choppy.

As Vlad and Bruno's both dirt gazes met, the former blazed up. "Oh! You must be Bruno!" he stated, shocked. At that, the newcomer nodded. "Yeah."

Suddenly, the boy had a mischievous grin as his eyes drifted off to briefly have a look at Blossom. “Aren’t you guys dating? You told me—” Bruno flinched once he asked that question while Blossom seemed speechless. She blathered as she raised her hand slowly. “Vlad, we…” Her pupils ambled away from anyone’s sight.

Vlad cackled boomingly. “Ok, ok! It’s a secret.”

The awkwardness of the moment dashed away once another person stepped into the scenes, with his huge, strong boots of course. Bruno turned back to catch the eyes of Mercury, the team leader he knew way back in the first day. It’s only now that he knows how towering the boy is though. He could be taller than the art teacher!

Mercury’s cape blew from the AC above, making him so much more menacing. “Vlad, what are you doing? Get a move on! Don’t—” He paused as soon he noticed Bruno silently standing there. “Oh! Bruno, and Blossom. There you are, Bloss!” The girl instantly had her hair stand up, shivering. “Do you know what’s up with Aster? Where is he?”

Clarity came solemnly to Bruno and Blossom, but there still some loss of it as the former questions why Aster is gone. The long-dressed girl had a sliding moment of saying “uh” followed by her answer. “One: I don’t know and two: I just got here.”

“Oh. Right,” muttered Mercury.

Soon enough, one of the members rejoined the crowd as he retreated from searching through the potted plants that were scattered through a corner of the floor. When Bruno turned to look, he noticed that one was covered in brown.

“Merc, I’m covered in dirt! What is this!?” he roared. It was Ivan, an old, and clever, classmate of Bruno back in Brooklyn, now a member of the hooligan band.

“So, you guys are all looking for Aster?” Bruno questioned, making sure and affirming his assumptions. He did get an answer from Mercury. “Yes, we are trying to, but he’s a chameleon apparently!”

Vlad smirked. “Makes sense. He loves chameleons.”

Mercury scorned faintly. Suddenly, his eyes widened as he realized something. “Wait, where’s Kyanide?” Bruno flipped his head around, puzzled. Who is Kyanide again?

“He’s at class,” a plumper girl came, approaching the group formed around the leader. She seemed to have returned from the far end of the floor. At that, Mercury groaned harshly, having his engines starting blaringly. “Great. Another order not listened…” he moaned.

Sharply, Mercury turned to give his solar look at his underling and newcomer. “Blossom, Bruno, can you try to get him out of Class 4?” he requested softly.

“Why can’t you do that?” Bruno asked, splattering his mouth.

Mercury and the rest of Team Toxic there plummeted their pupils straight down in shame and embarrassment. “We’re… banned from there,” Mercury explained sluggishly.

“And how is Blossom not banned?” the newcomer went on to grill further, unimpressed and unamused. Strangely, it was Vlad to answer instead of his boss. He had that same cheeky look as usual. “She was friends with Hannah. That’s why.”

Bruno exchanged glances with the flattered Blossom, who was chuckling in such a fake way, though Bruno pretended to just ignore what was said. The girl spoke. “Alright, alright. Let’s head to the class,” Bruno declared.

“Wait!” Blossom yelped. “The prank, remember?”

Everyone in the crowd continuously blinked, even Bruno, although it stopped much earlier than the others. “Prank?” blathered Mercury. Vlad’s eyes turned into broad circles. “Can I join in?!”

“No! It’s top secret,” Blossom whispered. “Aster will hate you guys if you do it anyways. He already hates Bruno and he loves me too much.”

Vlad’s hair drooped. His dejected face reflected on the others, but it didn’t change them. They even seemed to ignore him as Mercury told Blossom once more. “Well, when you’re pranking him, whenever it is, just ask him if he’s ok.”

Blossom nodded assuredly, determination struck her. “’Course!”

“Well, it’s nice meeting you,” Bruno said as he started to walk away, leaving the team behind, taking the left path to his classroom. Before he opened the door, he heard an echo from a distance that sounded like Mercury, though it was much more sarcastic than how he would usually talk to Bruno. “Nice meeting you too, ladykiller.”

As soon as Bruno entered the room, he noticed how there were no paper airplanes flown right at him anymore. Instead, everyone was just murmuring. All of them speaking right into each other’s ears. Once they caught wind of Bruno’s presence though, they all stared at him, collectively a mix of sympathy and sneering.

Bruno ignored them however and continued heading onto his seat, still dazed at what happened yesterday, especially after finding Alex who was taped into a book he was reading. The newcomer shuffled his feet as he went, quietly hating on the glances his classmates gave him, even if they were kinder ones. It was quite a contrast to the day before too. Everyone seemed to be fairly normal up to this point, so Bruno wondered if rumors have spread.

Anyhow, he ended up on his seat. That was when everyone began to mind their own business once again. Now his eyes were glued at Alex, sitting across from him, still reading the book. Bruno, feeling grated, swung away and drew out his dusty old book, entitled recently as Insulso, although he originally called it The Haunted House. Of course, it was just a silly working title.

He also pulled out his rusty pencil and smudged graphite all over the pages that formed text. It consisted of his inner-rants about someone, though he somehow formulated that into the perfect story that perfectly fit into what he was already writing. His mind was filled with dread over the situation he stuck himself in since the day before. He felt his name was put in the mud at the moment. It wouldn't hurt to vent about it, even if it was unwarranted in the narrative he was conjuring.

For the singular minute he examined his writings carefully, his heart had a huge beat as it felt a sense of pride but also the twinge of a mortal wound inflicted mentally. It was all too familiar though, thanks to the very person sitting next to him, as well as some others. The sudden rage of the reminder he experienced forced him to write more.

Once he finished putting all his thoughts into page, he shot it down to his bag again and, after breathing, he went on to glare at Alex. "When will you talk to me again?" he rasped.

Icily, Alex's eyes only cornered to subtly leer at his partner. "… Do you think I will?" he howled back faintly.

"You are talking to me now," Bruno moaned.

At that, Alex froze, darting his pupils away awkwardly. He sweated in embarrassment, but immediately growled to himself right after, Bruno not even being able to tell how he felt. Either way, he sighed, taking a deep thoughtful breath before speaking calmly again.

“Alex, listen to me,” he called, making his partner turn by the pure nature of being told what to do. “I’m sorry, ok? I know getting together with Blossom is wrong and—”

He was cut off once Alex sharply turned away again to stare at his book. “You want to see Aster too,” he hissed as if he was muttering to himself.

Bruno shook a little until he firmly gripped himself into his seat once more. He blathered too. “…Later today?” he questioned slowly. “Yeah…” There was freezing air, not from the AC, but from the tension. “How do you know?”

Yet again, Alex turned around to look at his partner, as solid as before. All he did was blankly stare at the newcomer, his mouth shut, staying still as words couldn’t escape no matter how hard he tried to get them out. Instead, Bruno spoke. “Is it because you’re,” he coughed briefly to joke on him, “not blind?”

“That and… leader instincts,” Alex added begrudgingly.

Bruno felt himself withering. He was a forget-me-not that was wilting without water. He didn’t know what to say other than something else that was a detour. “People can’t control their feelings, Alex. Also, it’s not like I’m going to date Aster. It’s all about Blossom. We haven’t even started dating, really! Ask her!” His notes grew urgent the more he spoke.

“You both are making suggestions though,” Alex snarled, icily not even looking at Bruno. However, the newcomer could tell that something else was on his mind, something that didn’t correlate with his actions and words he was spouting.

While Alex wasn’t even looking at him, Bruno could tell that his mind was scrambled, as scrambled as doodles from a schizophrenic that formed nothing coherent. His eyes wouldn’t stop trembling as much as his thin, pale skin. He even scoffed at himself, his mouth curling.

His lisp got into full action as he scorned, “I’m the fool though, aren’t I?”

Bruno spluttered, bewildered at the sudden shift. “What?”

Alex lifted his head softly and only by a couple of angles. “I told what happened between us to everyone, even if they saw it all.”

Once he said that, Bruno drifted his eyes around, floating to find everyone appearing to have knowledge of what was being told, yet ignoring it. “I can tell,” he sneered.

“Well, I’m stupid for telling them exactly what we argued about. I should’ve kept what happened between us, but… it’s not only that.” Right after, Alex had a deep sigh and a high heave of his chest as he was going to continue with a softened note with a subtle groan. “I was wrong…”

Bruno smiled warmly and slightly raised an eyebrow. “Finally realized that?” he said, almost in a taunting manner. However, Alex didn’t respond. All he did was look forward, still covered in shame, drowning in it like he was in the twilight zone.

“I don’t know how I should feel about anything anymore,” started Alex, blowing as if he was doing that with his confession. “Why else do I act like a light switch to you? You’re so new and different from everyone in this class. It’s ironic. You’re so normal, so much so that even *you* acknowledge it, while the rest of us have something notable about us. Something, I don’t know, mystical? Whatever word you want to use.”

Alex sighed further. He appeared as if he just finished vomiting but wants to proceed puking more. Bruno, meanwhile, had his heart plummet yet race rapidly at the same time. The person, the leader, the one he longed the most to be a friend, looked at him in a different way. In a way that Bruno always wanted to see himself—as someone special.

The leader went on anyways. “It’s not only that, of course.” His lisp was gone, now only leaving the remains of a voice as hoarse as McRyan’s.

It rose again when he spoke later. “Ever since the class system was founded, I was told by Hannah and Zina that divided loyalties shouldn’t happen. It did to you though, yet you didn’t stop being with me.” He had a strange, bewildered note to him. “I mean, we just fought yesterday and you’re still willing to come back. You’ve been trying to get it with her and Aster for over a week by now… but you’re still with me.”

Realization sparked the boy again as his glasses almost fell off from the sweat he was emanating. Finally, his eyes widened once he said what he thought out loud. Bruno had a smugness to him, mixed with determination and an adamant spice. He yelled, “That’s only because that rule is wrong and stupid! It was only created for petty drama that Pips wants to see.”

“I think it is…” muttered Alex, his eyes now twitching.

“And it worked!” Bruno added rowdily.

Alex, whose head was away, now turned to his partner. “Well, I’m not only upset because you love her. I just hate Blossom,” he told bluntly.

Bruno facepalmed sarcastically and chuckled in the same way. “Oh, of course!” he told to himself as if he was ignoring something under his nose. “You broke up with Team Toxic!”

“It’s not only that,” Alex broke, causing the newcomer to flinch. “I broke up with her and Aster shortly before I left the group. Actually, I quit it because of them.”

Sympathy danced in Bruno as serenely as dewdrops passing by a leaf. “Ah, I see,” he murmured. A question was about to be asked but he guessed that it would probably be better if he didn’t know. It was about Alex’s relationship with Blossom… if it was more than a friendship.

Instead, he rekindled himself. “You know, I’ve always wanted you to get back with her! Having my two closest friends in this school get along would be great!”

However, Alex grimaced, though in a more panicked sense. “Didn’t she tell you why I left?” he screeched. Bruno, thankfully for him, defected that question by answering back in a snap. “Team Toxic is brutal, I know.” For a flash though, he recalled how he just saw them searching for a teammate. Was that even true? “But I’m not asking you to be with Team Toxic, or even Aster, just Blossom!”

As much as Bruno tried to convince him, Alex continued to hesitate, making moans as he thought until he calmly responded. “I’ll decide when I want to get together with them again. Besides, they’re not the only friends I had… but that’s a story for another day.”

In his mind, Bruno pondered if this was what Blossom meant by Alex and Aster both being too hurt by their respective pasts. There seems to be more than the surface going on, but he also knew it was too early to really know everything. All he guessed was that things were messy.

“For now though, you can be with Blossom. I promise I won’t change my mind anymore,” Alex declared. He lowered his voice. “I’ve been thinking about everything when I got home last night. I was stupid and petty. While I may not like it, if you’re happy with her, then I can’t change that.”

At that, Bruno’s smile broadened and grew much warmer, soon as much as the sun. “That’s great to hear!” he joyfully exclaimed. Like the wise leader, he softened his tone. “And just so you know, I’ll always be your friend, Alex. No matter what happens, nothing will change my mind. I promise you.”

Alex had huge red cheeks heating up. His grin was as genuine as fine, freshly made wine, and for some reason Bruno couldn’t explain, his friend had an air of… something different in him. Nonetheless, he accepted Alex as he murmured, “Thanks.”

Unfortunately, the tender moment had to end once Bruno remembered a very specific point later on to the way. The point that may tear the pair's little conclusion. Yet again, bitterness boiled in the newcomer.

"Right," he muttered awkwardly. "Blossom needs me during the break." At once, Alex recoiled and gritted his teeth. "Excuse me?" he replied incredulously. "Why?"

"For Aster," Bruno answered. For a heartbeat, he felt like Alex was backing down from their agreement. Thankfully, he wasn't. Instead, Alex just had a preposterous look to him.

"I smell trouble," he hissed faintly. That caused Bruno even more embarrassment and even triggered a cringed expression! However, the leader went on. "What do you need Aster for anyways, or did Blossom just force you into this?"

Bruno shook his head. "Not really. Did you forget you and Aster made a deal to solve this mystery?"

Alex jerked once more. Perhaps his rage really did prompt him into having mild amnesia. Despite the boy with a beanie trying to open his mouth, Bruno spoke once more. "We need Aster, but he's too occupied with… something. Blossom told me it's a book."

Now Alex had the chance to interrupt him. "You said you found a Dusk and Dawn copy that may be connected to this mystery… and there was text in Tagalog…" He paused to piece the puzzle together. Finally, he had his bright head shown once more as he eventually did solve the riddle. "Of course! Aster may be the key!"

Bruno had half-expected Alex to instantly accuse Aster of being the perpetrator. Perhaps he did manage to change his mind just a smidge after all. Still, he had time to muster up an offer. "That's right. Maybe you can join in too? We don't *have* to prank. I can tell Blossom to just approach him."

“Thanks. I’d rather not cause trouble. I’ve already gone through enough with those rascals,” snorted Alex, seasons of silly trauma catching up to the poor boy. The way he said it even made Bruno go on the brink of giggling.

Soon enough, the English teacher, Garcia Berry, had arrived, joyous as ever. That was when Bruno and Alex turned on their studying switches and proceeded to become students like they aim to be.

Eventually though, every period had to come to an end. This one finished quickly. A minute only passed when the bell rang again! It made sense considering the fact that Bruno quite enjoys English class, especially with Mrs. Berry. It has only been a week, yet he felt like he warmed up enough with the young lady.

Finally though, once the break started, Blossom immediately broke into class as soon as everyone else had already left and Bruno and Alex were about to amble out. They skidded to a halt as soon as they saw the girl in a pink dress.

“Bruno! Come on!” Blossom encouraged. Then she froze when she spotted Bruno’s friend next to him, tilting his glasses. “Alex?”

“We made up, Bloss,” grinned Bruno.

Blossom beamed too. Her smile grew once the boy spoke up. “I’d like to find Aster too. Bruno told me that you wanted to prank him and…”

“We don’t have to prank him!” the girl insisted.

“I was… going to tell you that,” Bruno smirked weakly.

Alex swung his head around, perplexed. “So, we’re just going to go up to him, yes?”

Blossom nodded. “I’m going to sneak up on him! You and Bruno can just be behind me.” She really had that same sweet tone as usual, but now it seemed much more menacing considering what was saying.

Despite that, everyone ducked their heads to each other and rushed on forward. Instantly as they got out, they caught Aster strolling downstairs, like everyone else did. He somehow got blended in with the crowd, even with his blatant leather jacket always shining and his pure black, angled hair. Looks like his height was how he hid so easily.

The three got to their feet as hard as they could, dashing with all their might to continue following Aster at his breakneck speed. Finally, after a descent down, they reached the standstill that is the school grounds, where Bruno usually stays during break. As they got two feet away from the door, their eyes searched around until Blossom spotted Aster, laying comfortably, reading the book.

“There he is!” she yelped as she pointed out, grabbing the others’ collective attention. Immediately, they hastily padded towards the scrawny reader, although Blossom went behind him.

Aster, still glued to the book, was skimming when suddenly, Blossom screeched and leaped out. “ASTER!!”

Chapter 20

Aster's Secret

At once, Aster jerked terribly and dropped the pages down. He even whimpered and whinnied in fear while his longtime friend launched onto the green floor.

"Jeez! When will you—" He choked as soon as he lifted his head to find Bruno and Alex, both towering over him curiously. The boy gulped, making Bruno feel more pleased, having enormous satisfaction in having payback for the crimes his bully committed.

"What's going on here!?" he shrieked like a wimp.

"What's going on is that we want to know what's going on with *you*!" Blossom pointed out.

Aster didn't react. All he did was stare blankly with dry eyes and a completely shut mouth. It lasted until he opened it again. "It's none of your business." He scoffed harshly after. "Ay nako! Why can't anyone just leave me alone for one second?!" His raspy voice echoed greatly while his hair continued to curtain his right eye.

"Oh? Maybe because you're a coward?" Bruno jeered, losing his grip on his words due to his pure rage. That made Aster flinch, then growl in the same emotion. Bruno proceeded to talk over him. "Too cowardly to even hang out with your best friend!?"

"I am not a COWARD!" roared Aster vigorously, instantly getting up with all the energy he had from his anger. His tiny feet stomped grandly in some miraculous way.

In that short time that Aster was stuck on Bruno, Alex managed to duck and pick up the book that lay flat on the floor. It only showed its back until he lifted it to reveal its title. He tried his best to hold back laughter

while Aster and Bruno continued to leer at each other and Blossom meekly stood back.

"You've tortured me for too long, Aster!" Bruno snarled.

"I tortured *you*? You torture *me*! Besides, I haven't even done anything to you since the first day! All because of your stupid best friend and this mystery going on," Aster howled.

"The mystery *you*'re behind," snapped Bruno.

At that, Aster recoiled, breathing in all the air he could as if he just heard something super absurd. Then he let it all out as he barked back. "I was behind!?" he wailed.

Blossom exploded suddenly. "Quit arguing, guys!" she wallowed. "Please! I hate seeing a fight like this!"

But Aster continued to bellow, now directed to his best friend. "And I guess this is because you're dating him?"

"Dating him? How did—"

Blossom was interjected by Alex who bombarded the air with immense laughter. It was so loud, it could be heard through a whole neighborhood. Strangely enough, nobody showed their attention to the scene. When the others peered at him, Alex finally revealed the cover of the book to the others, making Aster jerk.

"Dusk and Dawn!?" Bruno and Blossom yelped in unison.

Alex continued laughing hysterically while the couple exchanged confused glances before looking back at the now ticked off Aster, who was about to become a bomb. "How. Dare. YOU!" he breathed every word as if they were sentences.

"So you *are* the one behind all this!" Bruno accused.

"How!?" rasped Aster, swinging his head to the newcomer.

"Bruno found a copy of Dusk and Dawn… It was owned by Tadashi, y'know, the last person who might've been with Renard, and it

was even in Central Park, but there was Tagalog writing," Blossom explained, almost losing her breath. She seemed much more shocked than Bruno. After all, she was the one denying the claim that her friend was involved. Perhaps this is enough proof for her.

Aster's jaw gaped. "Ano?!" he exclaimed.

"That's the face of a perpetrator! My father taught me that," Bruno proudly declared out loud, solidifying the faces of the others.

"I am *not* the perpetrator, I swear!" hissed Aster, almost in a pleading manner.

"Well then," Alex started, shoving through Bruno to get some air and tossing the shiny copy of Dusk and Dawn down behind Aster. "If you're not behind this, then translate the text."

His orders were given while he handed Aster the book, which was already open. When he got hold of it, the troublesome boy flipped through the pages, miraculously not tearing anything. Suddenly, after he squinted to read, he lifted his head slightly to narrow his eyes on the other teens surrounding him. "Just so you know, that is *not* my handwriting," he stated emotionlessly. He abruptly interrupted himself with a sharp snarl. "You guys literally interrogated a guy because you could recognize his handwriting, but you can't for me, someone you two have known for, oh I don't know, almost a decade?"

It was true. The fact that they didn't even think about it was quite ludicrous for Bruno, unless they do sort of feel the same way about Aster as him. He knew Alex did, but Blossom? It couldn't be. Nonetheless, it certainly embarrassed the pair as they exchanged embarrassing glances and swallowed.

When Aster poke his nose again, he turned the page to the first where it read "Richard Winston." Suddenly, he gasped. "Of course!" he breathed heavily.

“What is it?” Blossom spluttered.

“Richard Winston is my cousin,” Aster told them.

Alex sneered. “Oh? And what’s the proof?”

“Why would I lie about someone being my cousin?” he asked. Before he was about to say more, Blossom interjected. “Your aunt’s son? Her name was Dahlia Winston. I didn’t know she had kids though.”

“Just one son,” Aster briefly explained. “He was in this school but not anymore. He moved to St. Williams.” He took the flash of a second to recall then inform again. Meanwhile, Bruno used the time to remember that name: It was the new school the alumnus now attends. “He’s good friends with Tadashi, even if he’s a year younger, and if anyone in my family reunion would talk about books, it’s Richard! Though his favorite is Dusk and Dawn.”

Alex was trying to hold back the same smirk and laughter from before. Thankfully, he managed to this time. It made sense. Alex was the kind to enjoy fine writing as Bruno could tell from the few weeks he knew him. Having read Dusk and Dawn, Bruno guessed that it was far from anything too sophisticated! Even Aster seemed apprehensive and timid when he confessed quietly.

“He was the one who got me into the book, actually… That’s why I’m reading it right now.” He shook himself soon after. “Anyways, I think Richard lent Tadashi the book. If you found it in Central Park, that must’ve been from Tadashi. I know Rich well; he never likes walks!”

Bruno mentally noted everything while Blossom watched in fascination and Alex had an incredulous look to him as he kept an eyebrow raised.

“So then, what do the texts say?” Alex asked, almost suspiciously.

That prompted Aster to continue his skimming from before. While he was flipping the sheets, he somehow answered. “It’s… strange,” he remarked, aghast.

“I think they’re subliminal messages that anyone but a Filipino could translate. This has got to be intentional…” commented Aster softly.

Alex erupted though. “JUST TELL US!” His patience certainly had died down after the recollection from Aster was that just dawdling to him. It didn’t amuse him though, but it did to Bruno as he flinched and backed away a few inches.

“And I thought you were the master of patience,” retorted Aster under his breath. He raised his voice to his normal raspy one as he began to translate. “My lord, you will finally be proud of me. I am going to make not only one new follower, but two, and one of them is loyal to the chosen ones! Not anymore. Now they will only listen to you, my lord. Tadashi will bring in someone, it could be anyone, I don’t care who. At least there will be less resistance for you. Tadashi will be perfect and yours.”

Immediately, everyone raised their heads, their eyes shrunk as they realized it. The lord… Making one loyal to someone who aren’t the chosen ones… Tadashi being one of two… It all made sense now, the bloody writing in those walls. They all exchanged horrified glances while they puzzled the conclusion together.

“Of course… They were corrupted! *Pips* was corrupted, that’s how he wrote that message without him even being aware about it!” Alex was the first to proclaim.

It was Blossom’s turn to speak. “And Tadashi was corrupted too! If he’s corrupted and made Renard and his body perfect, then…”

“What does that mean?” Bruno muttered. He knew full well, but he didn’t want to admit it. The truth hurts so much.

However, Aster had to break it as he dropped his book. “My family are known Darkeners. They were corrupted! Richard… He must’ve been in on things… He was corrupted too! Bruno, that means Renard is…”

They all gasped and concluded…

“RENARD IS CORRUPTED!”

They all froze in complete silence as they continued to gaze at each other with their still pea-sized pupils. Meanwhile, Bruno could feel the tingle in his nerves as he sensed everyone else surrounding them, watching, being as petrified and mortified as them.

The first to move was Bruno who instantly got on his adamant feet, rounding away in a flash. It caused the others to thaw and face him. “We need to save Renard! He’s in danger!” he announced.

However, Alex, in a heartbeat, halted the newcomer by pulling his shoulder to turn back to them. “It isn’t a good idea to just waltz in to nowhere! We don’t even know where he is.”

“For all we know… he could’ve died from corruption,” Blossom choked, months of pain seething through her while Aster comforted her silently by padding her back. “Like Hemlock.”

That name perked up Bruno. There was no confirmation of the poor boy’s death. Perhaps corruption was too obvious though, as the three old friends had concluded once upon a time. Even Bruno could tell there was a searing pang of pain that bristled Alex.

However, that energized Bruno more. “Renard isn’t dead. He’s a shapeshifter, he’s magical, he has to be strong!” he firmly stated, passion turning into a volcano, which lit his leader, but not enough to be positive. “I like your attitude Bruno, and you’re sort of right knowing Renard, but still, we must plan things out.”

“Right. Plans,” Aster smirked discreetly.

“It never hurts to have a plan,” Alex sneered back. But then humility washed over him as he breathed and stared at his feet before showing his eyes to Aster. “At least you’re upholding your end of the deal though. You weren’t useless after all.”

Aster bursted. “Useless!?”

Blossom shoved in between the arguing boys. “Quit it!” she yelped. “We need to find Renard, not fight over crap!”

Alex and Aster once glanced at the girl, then at each other, now with fixed narrow gazes before they turned away and huffed.

Bruno was still shaken about everything though. The thought of his classmate being in pain and danger like this… It definitely hit him hard enough to have his heart throb and quiver as a million pieces explode. His expression made his emotions obvious, to the point where the others noticed. “Don’t fret, Bruno. We’ll bring justice!” Alex assured.

“Thanks. Renard doesn’t deserve corruption. Darkeners do,” Bruno stated gloomily.

When silence came, Aster skimmed through the book again and sighed deeply, almost in bitter longing that sourced to a dark age. “My family are Darkeners,” Aster proclaimed. “I already said that though.” Shame filled his aching heart. “They do deserve corruption.”

Now Bruno began to piece it together. Aster was a scruffy boy because of how he was raised, right? Unless Aster wishes to be a Darkener himself, he must’ve been mistreated harshly by everyone in his family tree. Of course though, that was an assumption, but judging by the looks on Blossom and Alex, that conclusion didn’t seem to be far from the truth.

The softness in Aster was pushed away after a scoff and a flip of his head, his choppy hair flopping around with the air. “But they’re already corrupted. They want to be!”

At that moment, Bruno felt an ounce of pity for his own bully…

It stopped when Alex ordered around. “Ok, enough of your family talks. Let’s quit dawdling and actually try to have a look around. Maybe somewhere random in the school will have Renard,” he said, thinking along the way.

“Probably his body…” breathed Blossom subtly to Bruno.

“Bruno, you go through the school grounds here. Aster, search through the second floor and Blossom, the third. I’ll sleuth the first,” commanded Alex, somehow having an imposing tone despite his stature. He was even smaller than the girl next to him!

Nonetheless, Bruno followed because of the investigation and Blossom and Aster just wanted to uphold their end of the deal better than avocations and translations.

Before they were about to head on to their tasks though, Bruno immediately spotted someone from his class, a boy of a darker complexion and pure black hair. As he was charging ahead, Bruno realized that it was Maverick. He appeared to be agitated though, which was strange. His alarms went off even more when he started yelling…

“BRUNO! ALEX! HELP!”

Chapter 21

The Missing Ghoul

At that instant, Alex spun around to face his classmate who had just arrived an inch away from Bruno, panting and breathing like he just had a marathon through the entirety of the city. Eventually, the other two did as well. Even if they weren't called, they guessed that maybe the turn of events would be as important as they imagined.

Maverick didn't seem to be normal. Unlike any other time, his monotone jacket was very unkept, the hoodie leaning towards the left and almost ahead of his shoulder. Even his hat that was similar to Bruno's was on the brink of falling off before the teen adjusted it.

"What's the matter?" Alex asked. While his partner was calm, Bruno couldn't help his racing heart and his instantaneous sweat.

"Mandy…" Maverick breathed. The anticipation caused Blossom and Aster to flinch before anything was even uttered. They were as apprehensive as Bruno was, since even he wanted to jump back. "She… she was taken away!"

Now Bruno could openly jump while Alex began to heavily breathe, not from dashing of course. It was from the angst he was experiencing. The four exchanged horrified glances and, at the same time, Maverick sighed heftily.

"She was taken by a guy in a cloak… I tried to protect her but I… I couldn't!" he wailed, closing his eyes to avoid the tears. There was a scalding pang in his brittle voice. While Bruno didn't want to believe it and had thought for a second that it was just some prank to fearmonger him and Alex, the way that Maverick spoke and acted, shivering and

cowering, didn't seem to suggest that. He appeared to be genuinely in distress over his lost friend. When Bruno turned to Alex, he was affirmed by the dip of his head.

Blossom was strangely the one to speak first, her comforting soul touching Maverick, making her even pad his shoulder physically. "It's okay, Maverick! We'll try to find her."

However, Aster instantly spasmed. "Excuse me!?" he spat. While he was twitching, Blossom glared at him and huffed vainly. "Maverick isn't from any of our classes; we shouldn't be doing anything with him or the literal ghost he hangs out with!"

"I don't care," declared the girl in pink. "I think we're better off finding someone rather than roaming around the school aimlessly, at least that's what I think."

Bruno nodded happily, being prouder of Blossom having his spirit to help though than anything else in the atmosphere. "Well said, Blossom," Alex grinned, suddenly padding in between Aster and Blossom when he was closer to Maverick earlier. Bruno chimed in soon after. "And we'd be killing two birds with one stone! Who knows? Maybe Mandy's kidnapping has something to do with Renard's disappearance."

Eventually, after the four teens exchanged glances, each of mixed emotions that kept being varied, except for Aster who constantly had his grumpiest face ever, they paused to stare at the foreigner. Finally, he groaned deeply. "Fine. We'll look for Mandy," he sorely agreed. Subtly, he hissed, "Only because Blossom wants to."

On the inside, Bruno wished he could cheer out loud, but he knew that conflict would arise if he did! At the same time, Maverick lit up, his jaws gaping and broadening to a huge smile. "Oh, thank you!" he beamed. "Mandy may be a ghost who can't exactly die, but I'm worried about what the guy would make her go through… What he would do with her!"

“Indeed. You’re valid in thinking that, Maverick,” affirmed Alex. “Soulsiders are powerful in many ways, and only God knows the possibilities of their use to bad apples.” Bruno could feel his partner shivering and shuddering at the mere thought of it.

Knowing how huge an impact Mandy’s capture would be, he was energized by it. “Darkeners have the nerve! Or, er, whoever that guy is,” he yelled, trying his best not to stutter, although that didn’t work out.

Blossom smiled warmly at Bruno, heating up his heart in the process, while he tried to ignore the scowling from Aster. It was obvious that he noticed what was going on, and it was plain to see that he didn’t seem to fancy it. Somehow though, he just stayed quiet. Bruno guessed it was to appease his longtime friend.

“They do,” sighed Maverick. His former wimpy stance turned firm as he grinned at his classmates. “Thanks to you guys though, I doubt the guy will be able to do anything!”

“That’s right. We won’t let him hurt her,” Alex declared. Soon enough, he spun around to face the other teens, now wearing a determined expression. “Now come on, let’s find Mandy before she ends up like Renard!” he commanded.

As the leader started to step away, Maverick spoke. “Her and I were right by the kindergarten area,” he began, later pointing at the pavement leading to its entrance. “Right by the door.”

And so, the four eager youngsters took note and head off, quick on their feet, leaving behind smoke for Maverick to see. He ignored it to admire the fire burning inside all of them. They even managed to forget about the herd of students surrounding them.

Once they reached the entrance though, the atmosphere turned strange, like the day had suddenly turned to the dead of night without any

trace of light. This amplified as Bruno opened the door to find… nothing… Nothing but the shadows.

Indeed, the corridors were hollow, there weren't even papers on the boards, nothing anywhere. Just an eerie, bored wall with that same odd smell of wet paint that was akin to the one inside the walls of the school.

"What is this place?" shrieked Bruno.

"The kindergarten area? Maverick literally just said that," sneered Aster, rolling his eyes in the process.

However, Bruno had that stingy, incredulous look to him that just screamed suspicion. Nobody could blame him for feeling ominous. After all, there was absolutely nothing inside, simply the blank space of where little children should be laughing, running and playing. Even Blossom was quietly wailing and gritting her teeth, trembling.

When Bruno spun to the short foreigner, he snarled. "How is this the kindergarten area? It looks like the hallway of a haunted mansion in a horror movie!" He was on the brink of bellowing at the end.

Alex inched closer to the entrance, and with every little shove of his foot, he could feel his every nerve wobbling. As he slowly opened his eyes, he realized that what was in front of him was real. His shallow words were uttered soon after. "Except it is."

Everyone turned to face him curiously, "I hate to say it but: Aster is right." His body was still turned away, not looking at the others, only staring at his feet. When Bruno briefly peered at Aster, he could find him trying to avoid forming a smirk that he never saw before. "This *is* the kindergarten area. It's crazy but it's true." Finally, he twirled around and met everyone's gazes. "You see: the kindergarteners always start late, around roughly three weeks after us."

Blossom lit up, her glum mood turning sweet again. “Of course! I remember mocking my older cousins for going before me every year,” she chortled.

At that moment, Bruno realized how much these three teens have been stuck in this school and for how long. Even if Aster was an immigrant, he managed to enter this school at such an early age.

Ignoring that, Bruno stepped forward alongside his partner, finally getting a clearer view of what was in front of him. It was as barren as a desert as he had imagined. No establishment for children should look like this, not unless it’s abandoned, which clearly isn’t the case here.

Eventually, Blossom and Aster too walked in, the former shutting the door slowly into it creaking. Once it boomed close though, the boys couldn’t help from flinching until they realized that it was just the door. “Don’t be afraid, guys! We’ve got each other,” Blossom beamed.

“Sure,” scoffed Aster, “and we’re searching for a literal ghost girl and one of our other schoolmates disappeared without a trace. I feel like there really is a dozen things to be scared about in this situation.”

“Aster, Mandy is a student at the school! Just because she wasn’t born a normal person doesn’t mean she’s lesser than us,” Alex scolded.

Bruno wished he could defend her too, but it was too late as Aster already gave Alex a couple of blaring gazes with his inky-purple eyes before advancing from the group. He dashed to a random room that was at the corner that bent to the right path.

“What is he doing?” muttered Bruno as he turned his look to Alex and Blossom. They lustered as they remembered something. “Of course!” Blossom grinned. “He’s going to our old room!”

At that, Bruno was about to splutter before Alex scampered through the corner, disappearing as the walls covered him. Blossom also followed him at a similar speed. It was certain that they were reliving their greatest

childhood memories that might've even taken place in these very corridors, at least for Alex and Blossom.

Once Bruno caught up to Blossom specifically, she started to talk again, unprompted, Bruno watching her glistened, youthful eyes as she spoke. "I'm surprised that Aster's comfortable with even being here though. He was bullied viciously here."

Bruno jolted his head. "Really?" he blathered.

"Indeed. He had only been in America for a week when he first came," Alex solidly said, having no inflection in his tone strangely.

Thoughts washed over Bruno's brain, and it was mostly consisting of sympathy, which he mildly felt was misplaced. Nonetheless, he could picture a very young, toddler Aster trying not to wallow while getting comments, remarks and shameless names from many other kids his age. Those who aren't even here anymore, who he doesn't even know because they do appear to have moved out if Alex says that he, Blossom and Aster are the only students who have stayed since kindergarten.

After all that, he could only muster up some words. "Did you guys do anything about the bullying?" he asked.

The only answer that came was silence though and some muffled hesitation until Blossom opened her jaw. "Well—"

"AY!" a sudden wail interrupted!

That instantly got the other teens to spasm and panic after exchanging horrified glances. So much so that they sprinted rapidly to Aster. Bruno was somehow the first to reach him, however, he had to skid to a harsh halt once he saw what was ahead of him.

Shallow, cold breaths came from him while the others rushed to arrive, Blossom trying to avoid clashing into any shelves. Then they gasped, shrouded in shock…

“Mandy?” murmured Alex curiously.

Indeed, it was Mandy! With her mighty, shadowy hoodie, her pale skin as much a ghost (expectedly), and her messy, pitch-black pigtails that flowed below her. But she didn’t seem to be in danger. As a matter of fact, Aster was!

He was pinned straight to the cold floor by Mandy, her arms stretched to keep him still there while she held a sheet of… stickers?

“What in the Underworld?” Bruno blabbered.

Mandy, whose attention was glued to Aster, now peered up to find the group of other teens towering over her. Even Aster was a bit shocked at the turn of events as his eyes turned to complete circles.

“Oh, hey folks!” Mandy grinned. While she greeted innocently, she cheekily slapped a sticker to Aster when his focus was on Blossom, keeping it on his cheek. The slap was so hard, it made the sound of a drum. “You didn’t see anything…” she went on to mutter.

Aster suddenly shoved her as he heaved himself greatly, rolling her off his back akin to a slide, although she immediately straightened herself after the push up. Finally, he could stand up straight rather than acting as a piggyback for the youthful ghost. As he got up, he guided his sleeping arm to find the sticker until he eventually could. Tearing it up wasn’t pretty though since he felt his cheek was totally ripped off afterwards!

When Aster took the sticker to examine it fully, he sounded bewildered as he spluttered. “Cupcake princess?”

“Mandy, we thought you were missing!” Alex groaned.

“Yeah, I was,” Mandy instantly replied. It looked like she read the genius’s mind.

“Well then… Why were you pinning Aster down to the ground and placing stickers on him?” Bruno asked once more.

Mandy hesitated at first, grumbling, but then she answered. “I was just having fun. Can’t girls have fun? Blossom, don’t you agree?” She sharply turned her head to the flustered kimono girl. “I guess…” she whispered with some shame, but also some shard of joy.

“But weren’t you literally kidnapped!? Maverick told us!” Alex roared, having it now echoes the barren walls. It emphasized his rage to the soulsider to the point where she shivered and finally caved in.

“I did get kidnapped! I escaped though because, well, I can phase through walls,” Mandy explained, almost half-heartedly. Despite her sounding calm and very nonchalant, the others’ eyes grew shadows as they all widened and glanced at each other. That intensified once Mandy went on. “Yeah, the guy in that cloak is dumb! Although he isn’t some guy in a cloak…”

“Who is he!?” Bruno immediately bursts. When he froze to look around, he noticed that Alex, Aster and Blossom didn’t seem to react. Perhaps they wanted to blurt the question out too.

A foreboding feeling loomed over all the teens as Mandy recoiled and sweated until finally, she responded. “Renard Fox,” Mandy grimly told, shadows forming over her head as if she, with her ghostly powers, manipulated all of light.

Have they done it? Has someone, even a single soul, found Renard? Was their task done? Those are those questions floating over Bruno’s brain, and he assumed the others questioned the same.

However, Alex was the first to open their mouth. “And you just… escaped?! And search for stickers?!” he yelled.

Mandy flinched before holding herself together and breathed. “I was trying to find some goodies from around here to show off. Also, I actually did get lost. These halls are humungous,” she explained swiftly.

At that, the four teens faced their heads together, meeting their colorful gazes. For a heartbeat, Bruno felt that connection he yearned for from them. At a time like this, it was warranted, and oh, did he enjoy it. Sadly, he knew this moment was fleeting and that focus had to be put on the victim of the missing case now. The genuine one.

Once they all faced Mandy, Alex spoke, foot to foot, with the girl. "What happened?"

Mandy rubbed her chin for a moment before explaining. "Well, I was hanging out with Maverick somewhere outside the kindergarten area. We were just taking a stroll before I was suddenly nicked by someone. Maverick tried to save me, but he didn't. I tried to fight back, and I managed to bring down the guy's cloak… That's when I found out that it was Renard taking me!" That was the point where the other four youngsters jerked. "I tried to talk to him but…" Mandy seemed to slowly lose her breath as she started to remember. "But he had those… eyes…"

The pigtailed girl's voice lowered to a mere whimper. "Those of evil. He took me to a room… and told me to be patient because I will go through something amazing." As she went on, her vocals became firm again. Bruno also began to realize how this might be confirming the group's theory that Renard was corrupted. It sure sounded like he was. "I didn't believe him, of course. Soulsiders have good instincts, and I'm no exception. When he got out of the room to do only Mother knows what, I managed to calm down and change my body enough to escape the ropes he wrapped me in. That's how I got here."

After exchanging wildered looks, Aster asked, "And you're not even concerned that he might find you?"

Weirdly, Mandy shook her head. "I can go invisible," she briefly answered. "Which on that note: I don't know where he could've gone, but I know I was in a room close to the exit there." As soon as she said that,

she pointed straight to her right. When Bruno leaned to look, he found that there was an extremely long, endless corridor. “At the end.”

It dwindled Bruno’s courage and deflated him, but the opposite happened to the others as they heaved their chests, having guts of steel. “Okay! We’ll go there then!” Alex declared. “Thank you, Mandy. You might’ve been a bit childish, but you did manage to help us.” Suddenly, his voice drew to that of cheeky sarcasm. “Now head to class with your cupcake princess stickers.”

Mandy had a grinding chortle, almost snorting, before she twirled around and skipped off, turning over the corner, fading into the light that the door slightly emitted before it shut. The place had gone dark again, just as Bruno feared, although it wasn’t like it was too bright where he was anyways.

“Well, we found a good lead,” Alex grinned as he rounded on the others. While they were mostly over the moon, Bruno was hesitant.

“We’re… going all that way in the dark?” he muttered.

Alex glanced at Blossom for some advice. Unfortunately, she didn’t answer, which caused Alex to groan and then respond with no energy. “You’ve got a flashlight, don’t you? Use it.” He sounded pretty much done with everything that Bruno says at this point. Did he even remember what he just said earlier that day?

Nonetheless, Bruno obliged. He flung his backpack down at that instant, unzipped it, and drew out his torch. That was when he noticed something peculiar though: The Stemlung bile. He would’ve forgotten about it if he didn’t look. For some reason, he felt like maybe now it’s important, unless Mr. McRyan really was scamming him.

As he dropped his flashlight in order to pick up the bile too, the others inched closer to see what was going on just to catch sight of the piece of goo floating in the ordinary boy’s hands. Once he unzipped the

bag, placed the flashlight in one of his pockets and wore the bag again, he noticed the glares of his companions.

"Guys?" he murmured. He was about to continue before noticing the bile literally in front of him. "Oh, right. This."

The looks from his allies were dazed, except for Blossom who was more fretful and deplored than anything at the noxious slime. "I forgot you even had this…" she whimpered.

"What is that?" Aster shrieked.

Alex gasped, not at the mere sight of it, but in realization. "Oh, of course!" he exclaimed, catching the attention of everyone else in the room. "That's Stemlung bile."

"Correct!" Bruno affirmed blissfully. "When you left, Alex, Mr. McRyan taught us about Stemlungs and he gave me this." The newcomer had guessed that his partner was about to enquire about something. So, he intercepted him. "He said that this bile will help us find Renard."

"Why?" murmured Alex, perplexed.

"I don't know, but that's why I brought it out," responded Bruno.

Alex pondered once more. Abruptly, he turned into the sun. "I think it might. If Mandy was describing Renard right, and if our theory is true, then he's very, very corrupted. Stemlung bile is known to have magical properties that scientists to this day still don't know. Perhaps whatever it has can help us after all." His words sounded robotic, yet Bruno followed it as he nodded along. He was the leader of not only the group now, but his entire class, and it was for a reason after all.

However, Aster sneered. "But we already know where Renard is."

"Where he was, Aster! Mandy said he's somewhere else now, and while there's roughly over 50% chance that he is in the far end over there, there is still a chance that he isn't," Alex barked back.

Aster's eyes turned to slits as he faintly jeered, "Nerd."

Chapter 22

Renard's Return

Moments of silence commenced as Bruno could feel the tension between Alex and Aster. Their blazing gazes fixed on each other, the waves between them becoming electric. All the newcomer could do was slightly back away. However, his girl wasn't the same. She had a sharp, determined expression.

Blossom launched suddenly in between the two and snarled, "This is no time for a staring contest!"

"Sure, and I guess you already know everything about the plant vomit?" Aster hissed.

At once, Blossom flinched, inching away like Bruno did, keeping a forcefield between herself and the now aggressive friend she has.

"Blossom is right. We should focus on the task at hand," Alex rasped as he dipped his head arrogantly. The same vanity could be seen with Aster. Were they lions fighting over territory?

Thankfully, Alex shook himself and spun away. He bounded away from the group, advancing forward.

Bruno watched, shame pouring over him. Blossom, on the other hand, was unamused at what she was witnessing. When the boy's eyes darted to her, he brightened up and pulled up his flashlight with his empty palm. As he tapped her and grabbed her attention, he handed it over to her.

"Just keep it with you. I'm a bit occupied," he smirked.

The girl nodded and smiled, but it instantly flipped as she returned her sight to Aster, now with the flashing of the torch she held.

Blossom soon followed Alex, ignoring her friend. Bruno didn't though. He took a couple of steps and turned behind to fully view the rage

burning inside of Aster. His leather jacket was somehow puffed like his angled hair that wasn't covering him anymore.

Bruno could find years of grief and heartache inside that he could never see before. It opened his eyes, both metaphorically and physically too as it widened greatly. Suddenly though, his brown gaze met Aster's black ones. It caused Bruno to jump so much that he scampered like a child to Alex and Blossom. He bumped into the latter.

As he realized that it was Blossom and once she froze, the two separated and looked at each other speechlessly. The girl giggled while Bruno blushed. "There you are!" When Bruno glanced at his hand, he noticed that the bile miraculously didn't fall off. It certainly was a sticky substance.

"It's alright," she assured. Bruno got to peer at her cheeks, knowing how soft they are as much as the rest of her skin. He blushed further.

As soon as Aster stepped in though, the pair immediately distanced themselves from each other and pretended to just have met each other. This could be believed further when Alex turned to watch what was going on, dumbfounded, wishing that he could scratch his head although his beanie was covering it.

Aster arched an eyebrow while Bruno chuckled awkwardly. He even noticed the puzzled Alex standing right there. Then, out of the blue, the bile shone brilliantly in the color that it already was, which was green.

The moment it glimmered; the four detectives observed it with high inquisition, Bruno poking his nose beside it. Despite it being the size of a pea, there surely was something extraordinary about it, and this definitely was it.

And soon after they stared at it, the bile beamed luminously towards a straight line, but it suddenly bent near the end to a door. It was like a

spotlight flashing to a celebrity, except it was for a missing person instead. A person that these young detectives hoped to be safe from a deadly disease. A person that the whole school was chasing after for over a week. Now it could be over because of the gunk of carnivorous plant vomit.

Bruno's heart raced immensely. It was a rocket off to space with its speed. There was no turning back now, no denying anything anymore. It was all or nothing and the others knew it too.

"This has to be where Renard is," announced Alex.

The drums inside of Bruno went on quicker and quicker. It energized him. It set himself to a flare of emotions, but the only one that stood was determination, the tenacious spirit to never call this case a cold one, to prove that Renard was corrupted or alive or, with a miracle, both.

Together, they set off, their toes synching. They trailed behind the path that the light of the bile formed, Blossom holding firmly on the flashlight as all her muscles contracted to a grip.

All the buildup, everything that happened before for the past week, it's all for this moment now.

Bruno skipped a beat when he and his companions finally arrived at the room. The bile even stopped, turning into complete dust as if its mission was complete. While Bruno wished he had time to ponder what it meant, he didn't. Now he had to focus on what was in front… If he could see it.

"It's so… dark…" Alex murmured.

It's true. There was nothing but black in front, not until Blossom flipped her flashlight to direct it around. Even so, there was black veiling the place surrounding the light. Aster, meanwhile, was brave enough to step forward. He ignored the nothingness in front of him to try to feel something on the wall, probably a switch.

Eventually, he did manage to find it. He turned on all the lights, revealing what they were looking at.

Like the rest of the kindergarten area, the walls were painted pure white, although it wasn't as bright as the rest of the place. Of course, this was because the lights weren't on anywhere else. Nothing was plastered on it though, and the only furniture was a rocking chair, a rocking horse toy and a wind-up music box. Classic horror movie room, Bruno supposed. Was this intentional? A prank from Renard, which may be a sign he snapped back?

It didn't seem to be when a cloaked figure could be spotted in the top right corner of the room, the part where the four teens could instantly see once the switch flickered. The figure was completely hunched down, almost into a ball. Bruno couldn't even recognize it as a person until it twitched a little as movement once the lights were back.

This horrified the youngsters as they quietly shrieked. They exchanged frightened glances, as if each other were the last things they'll see before they get six feet under.

Finally, Alex mustered up the courage to speak. "Hello?"

No answer. Just utter silence.

"Hello?" Aster called next.

Blossom shuddered, her voice box being out of order, while Bruno could only whimper and cower next to her. They had predicted the whole time that Renard was corrupted… Now was the moment of truth.

"What are you doing here?" some vocals rasped.

It was all too familiar to Bruno. Why?

"We're here to help you, Renard," Alex calmly said.

Aster prompted Blossom to lighten up, to make herself seem warmer, which she soon does, followed by Bruno, though he appeared more concerned than the rest.

"Renard? I haven't heard someone say that name in forever," it chortled. "Other than Mandy."

The masculine voice sounded eerily familiar. It was raspy, like the throat of the speaker was damaged by a sledgehammer. Then it struck Bruno: the voice was very much akin to Terrance's, except in a deeper notation! Or even McRyan, he dared to suggest to himself…. But none of their melodies were as ragged and broken as the one now.

"*You're* Renard… aren't you?" Blossom asked, her former welcoming tone turned turn to a whisper.

Sharply and suddenly, the cloaked figure's head was turned. It was so brisk that it made the group flinch collectively. Only its eyes could be seen though, just mere white lines too.

"Why are you so scared?" it taunted. "I *am* Renard, mind you."

"Prove it!" Aster spat.

Suddenly, but sluggishly to Bruno, the figure unveiled itself, drawing down the cloak that obscured its face into darkness. Finally, its head could be seen, now shimmering in the same light the ceilings emitted. Clarity had come to it.

Bruno narrowed his eyes until it broadened. He gasped alongside the others. That face… of course! It was Renard! The newcomer could tell by his ill-lit, rugged hair, his dull bluish-purple jacket that was nearly torn up and wrapped in the cloak, although his skin was much paler than usual. As a matter of fact, it was snowy. And most of all, his eyes were just like Mandy described it. Those of evil and utter blackness.

"Is this enough proof?" hissed Renard, the edge of his voice fluttering to Bruno with familiarity.

"Renard… are you really… c-corrupted?" stammered Bruno, fear cowering him.

Abruptly, Renard stood up, his cloak falling off finally, plummeting flat to the barren ground. "What else do you think happened to me?" sneered the boy, fully facing the group.

"Are you ok?" Alex blathered next.

"Do you think I am?" snarled Renard. Rage seemed to be boiling inside of him. Looks like it has either bothered him enough or really changed him.

While Aster and Blossom slowly backed away, Bruno stepped forward, letting go of his fear, knowing that this broke person in front of him was someone he knew, even if it was for a day. At least he can have comfort in the knowledge that Renard was there.

"Renard…" muttered Bruno.

"Leave. Now," Renard ordered sharply, "Before you get infected too!" His urgent rasps flinched the group, but Bruno brushed it off by shaking his head. And with his determination lending him strength, the newcomer spoke up to his peer. "I won't leave you! Renard, you're my classmate, and classmates never leave each other behind! At least *I* won't. Believe me."

At that, Renard's eyes could be seen lighting up, getting rid of the darkness that was infesting it to reveal his normal dark brown pupils. Bruno went on to comfort him, guessing that maybe it'll help him snap back to normal. "We've gone so far to find you. I won't give up now!"

"You did?" Renard questioned, his voice slightly turning back to his normal, still oddly squeaky, one.

However, that immediately dashed away when he got petrified as he took a single step. He breathed so strangely that it looked like his soul was getting sucked away. That caused Alex to pull Bruno away, the

newcomer finding anxiety that he had never seen before from his stern leader. His sporadic pull made him freeze too though.

Suddenly though, Renard shook once more, looking as if he was about to fall, but miraculously didn't. Instead, he gripped himself back and wheezed. After, he appeared to have returned to how he originally was, raspy and seemingly possessed.

"I can't... take it..." he said with hoarseness.

"What happened?" Alex asked cautiously.

Renard heaved his head to level with the four teens. "I... I got corrupted... on Monday..." Every other phrase was followed by a deep, ragged breath. "I was hanging out with... an old friend, Tadashi... When I got back home... I had a bad nightmare... I saw... *him*..." The last word was agonizingly emphasized. "I didn't mind it at first... That was stupid of me... When I got to school... at the assembly... I thought I was fine... but I felt dizzy... I had visions... That's when I knew... I knew..." A breath that was as deep as a trench uttered, "I was corrupted."

"So I ran away, trying to make myself... invisible... I didn't even pick up my bag... I just ran away... and wallowed... Nobody can get infected if I just stay here." That was followed by a final statement, it seemed. "But I suppose not everyone can be safe... Safe from Utter Darkness."

Everyone's hearts plummeted in unison, and so did their breaths for a split second. This was some ploy from Utter Darkness after all, a sick and twisted one. Bruno had begun to wonder if Terrance was the same.

Renard wasn't like how he was after… Instead, he appeared to be more covered in the dark as his head fully dipped like it once did. His arms straight down, flopped.

Once he straightened himself like a stick though, his eyes were completely engulfed in black, and he wore a grin that he never once wore before. They were so broad, it was almost like it belonged to the devil. His vocals, too, were strange. They were much scratchier and more distorted. That was when Bruno realized that it was the same voice he heard in that traumatizing nightmare!

"SO YOU *HAVE* BROUGHT THEM, HAVEN'T YOU, RENARD? I KNEW IT WASN'T A WASTE EMPLOYING RICHARD AFTER ALL," Renard smiled, his gaze completely straight at Bruno.

"What's going on!?" Blossom cried.

"RICHARD!" roared Aster, remembering his cousin.

Renard laughed hysterically, though it really was just a feeble attempt to with how raspy and wrecked his voice box was. His pale face contracted to a mischievous expression while the door mysteriously shut, as if a ghost did the work. But Bruno guessed that it was from the force of Utter Darkness. It terrified Blossom and made Aster hold onto her hard.

"I WATCHED EVERYTHING YOU DID, AND YOU LOT SURE ARE SMART. YES, RICHARD IS WORKING FOR ME. AND YES, THAT BOOK YOU HAVE?" Renard's question magically unzipped Bruno's backpack and levitated the copy of Dusk and Dawn, making it float in front of everyone. "IT WAS FROM RICHARD. HE DID INDEED HAND IT OVER TO HIS DEAR OLD FRIEND, TADASHI... AND NOW I'VE REACHED SOMEONE FROM THIS WRETCHED SCHOOL!"

His eyes were glazed with triumphant energy while the detectives backed away steadily, though their backs were against the door as it was totally locked. The book was pelted to them in the process.

"LOOKS LIKE MY CHANCES AREN'T BLOWN AFTER ALL. I'LL FINALLY GET TO YOU... YOU MEDDLESOME CHILDREN!" Renard screeched. "I'VE WAITED TOO LONG FOR THIS OPPORTUNITY! FOR FOUR THOUSAND YEARS!"

That was when Bruno, and supposedly the others, realized that Renard wasn't just corrupted. He was experiencing a side effect of it, and a major, terrible one at that. It was possession from Utter Darkness himself. The boy in blue remembered how the demon had been banished from Earth for four thousand years… This had to be proof!

"You're Utter Darkness, aren't you!?" Bruno called out while the others shriveled up, bundling their bodies next to each other beside the door. Renard turned his eyes into mere lines, prompting the newcomer to speak again. "You're not supposed to be on this planet!"

Renard scoffed, a cracked breath followed soon after. "WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT? HOW DO YOU EVEN KNOW?"

"The legends…" Alex breathed in apprehension.

"OH, OF COURSE. IT'S WHAT YOU MORSELS SPREAD, RIGHT?" hissed Renard, rounding on the group, attempting to circle around them. He had a mild grin after. "RIGHT."

The four quivered together, curling into a ball together with the weirdly strongest, Aster, in the middle of it. Though it was probably because of his scrawny size he was slightly engulfed too. Trembling together, they were facing down at a possessed Renard, who was slowly approaching them.

“What do you want from us!?” wailed Blossom, her shaky voice ringing through everyone’s ears.

“I WANT TO MAKE SURE I CAN TAKE BACK MY WORLD. AND TO DO THAT, WELL, THERE HAS TO BE SOME *CASUALITIES*,” Renard smiled ominously as he said that, his voice turning oddly silky as if he was so proud that it fixed his throat.

The four exchanged bewildered looks. “Take back *your* world?” Alex murmured. Renard, or Utter Darkness, only answered with a sharp snarl though and a growl like a fighter dog. He even stood like one, except on two feet of course.

The same stance was made by Aster as he softly shoved the others away so that he could have a path cleared for him. “Oh, we won’t become causalities! And we’re not morsels!” Aster barked back, fire flinting through his heart.

When the boy stood still, Blossom stared at him with tender admiration as her cheeks formed a sweet smile, that smile that Bruno adored from her. While he could be jealous, he couldn’t help but feel satisfied that she had a hint of respect for her old friend still.

Sadly, that had to die away once Renard lunged at Blossom herself! Her arms flailed as soon as Renard banged at her chest with his arms. Despite it being as skinny as a twig, he was powered up by the devil himself.

Renard began to scratch at her, acting as a wild tiger with muscular paws. He fiercely shoved her down, not letting her escape.

Meanwhile, the boys all gasped and froze, except for Aster who growled further and, after some trembling, started to pump himself. Finally, he used the energy to charge towards Renard, pushing him away from even touching his closest friend.

When the girl was let go, Bruno immediately rushed to her, finding her sitting, lying against the wall as her cheeks and neck had a couple scratches and gnashes. “Are you ok?” Bruno asked warmly. Blossom nodded. As their gazes met, the former’s heart fluttered.

Once Bruno and Blossom both turned to look at the fight, Alex stepped forward to pull Renard back with his jacket. “Quit it!” he hissed. Aster gave the boy one last punch before Renard flung the leader’s arm, smashing it to the floor as hard as he could, although it only reached the air. After, Renard went on to violently wrench Aster and busted their heads at each other, making the foreigner drop softly. Fortunately, he managed to prop himself with his arms.

Then Renard quickly elevated himself and slapped Alex enough to give him the shadow of his palm in red embedded in his cheek. This caused Alex to fight back by tossing him to the wall away from the others.

“WOW. AND I THOUGHT YOU WERE THE WEAKLING. TERRANCE TOLD ME, YOU KNOW? MAYBE HE WAS A LIAR,” Renard mocked.

Alex only jeered though before turning to his friends. “Are you guys ok?” he asked.

Blossom nodded and so did Aster who fully got up. “I’ve seen better days, but oh well,” he shrugged nonchalantly. However, his calmness turned to anguish once Renard laughed maniacally. “YOU’LL SEE WORSE,” roared the possessed boy.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU CAN EVEN FIGHT. AFTER ALL, AREN’T YOU FEELING WEAK BECAUSE OF YOUR GIRL? OH WAIT. SHE ISN’T HERE!” jabbed Renard, laughing haphazardly.

This made Alex and Aster blush greatly while Bruno leered at him, mentally filled with puzzlement. “What does he mean? Does he mean Blossom?” he whispered subtly. But the two were only statues at this

point, only staring at their cold feet. Although Aster thawed himself out first. He got himself into a frenzy as he pushed all those thoughts behind him and instead, let him power up because of it.

Aster instantly launched himself at Renard, flinging the both of them at the wall like the latter once was because of Alex. He's now glued to it because Aster kept holding on

"Leave Renard alone!" ordered Aster viciously.

Renard had an impish smirk; his pure black eyes glazed with cleverness. "ALRIGHT. I WILL," he declared as softly as he could.

"YOU ASKED TO LET HIM GO..." subtly whispered the shattered voice ominously.

At once, Aster felt a foreboding sense of doom and so did the others. Blossom's jaw descended while Alex was about to spasm out of control. Bruno was the only one to make quick motion as he nearly sprinted over there, but what they predicted would happen had happened, unfortunately.

Chapter 23

The Escape of Darkness

The young man slowly but surely separated himself from the wall with the pure force of his arms. Renard's eyes were shut until it gently opened, revealing that it had reverted back to normal. No more was it shrouded in black. Now there was a tinge of color… So, what does this mean?

Well… It was as the other teens had feared.

"What the…?" Renard spluttered. "Aster?" He began to tremble for some reason, his shadowy eyes shrinking to that of genuine shock.

"ASTER!" Blossom screamed, agony rusting her, breaking her to the point where she was on the edge of tears. She, like Bruno and Alex, had predicted what happened to the boy.

And indeed, it was confirmed when Aster spun around to face his companions, snapping his neck in the process. He even let go of Renard who instantly skidded backwards. "No, no, no!" he kept repeating as if he was a broken record.

"A-Aster?" stuttered Alex, horrified at what he was watching.

Aster showed how pitch black his eyes were. Bruno knew at this point that he was just like Renard…

"THIS BODY FEELS SO MUCH BETTER," Aster smiled widely, almost on the brink of chuckling maniacally, but just having a deep, scratchy breath instead. "ASTER REALLY IS AMAZING FOR ME."

Strangely, Aster appeared to be charging himself up as he wilted again, like a flower that had died. What was going on? Was Utter Darkness attempting to get into the boy's psyche? It seemed to be case after Blossom cried, "Aster, no! Leave him alone! Please!"

Aster snapped, assumedly. He cracked his every bone to become someone else. He even twitched. Once he raised himself, he didn't wear that grin anymore. Instead, he looked like a man who had lived a millennium of misery and chalked with grudge as his rough gaze was pointed right at Bruno, making him recoil.

At the same time, Renard scampered to group with the others, replacing Aster's place to be beside Blossom. "Utter Darkness did this to me…" he breathed, causing the others to glance at him. "This is when he looks into his victim's every insecurity and pain… to pry them out! To make them act on it!" He shriveled and shuddered. "But I wasn't with anyone when he did this to me. Only space and time knows now what Aster will do…"

And instantly, Aster leaped at Alex, crushing him to the wall!

"ALEX!" they all screamed.

Bruno rushed to him first. Luckily, Alex managed to push Aster away from fully injuring him. "You lunatic!" the leader slowly roared. "Snap it out!"

But Aster could only snarl and growl at this point. He was an angered lion that was about to claw out his old friend he had to trust. "All you do is bother me! All you do is remind me of her! All you do... is blame me for every one of your *mistakes*!" he rasped boomingly, echoing harshly in Alex's ears. Bruno could see as clear as day the fear and melancholy that was cascading on his partner's face.

For that short time of vulnerability, Aster took the opportunity to slam Alex down to the ground, letting him stay flat. He was about to lift himself until, yet again, his enemy laid a foot on his back, keeping him glued to the horror-ridden floor.

“Aster, let him go!” Bruno ordered in a hiss. Soon, he posed, ready for his taekwondo action that he showcased on the first day. “Or else…” Their narrowed eyes finally met. It didn’t strike Bruno though, but to Blossom and Renard instead. And instead of doing anything, Aster continued to not budge at all, prompting the newcomer to go on.

“You’ll regret hurting my friend!” Bruno roared adamantly.

“Make me then,” retorted Aster, forming a snide smile. “I dare you,” he continued taunting, having it intensified as he tried to stomp on Alex further while he struggled to peer at his partner.

So, as Aster had heckled, Bruno let go of his bag, dropping it flat, he made his feet clear and firm before finally striking his bully as he belted at him. This caught Aster off guard, possibly because he didn’t even expect his number one victim of his ways to actually act on his threats. They both cracked at the floor, bangs being created.

Bruno and Aster were brawling it out, battling as if it was every second they had was their last, though the newcomer continued to keep Aster grounded. Their fists became slight shadows and motions in the short, intense air between them.

Meanwhile, Alex momentarily bounced out of his position and raced to Blossom and Renard, shielding the former while the latter bound away to view the madness.

“Bruno, be careful!” Blossom cried. “Aster! Be yourself again!”

“I must…” Renard started to whisper before he got interrupt by the shrieks and groans of agony from Bruno as Aster bit his arm.

“Alex, let me go! I want to help them—!”

“No, Blossom! You saw how I almost got crushed by your friend!”

But there was a glimmer in the girl’s eyes that even Bruno could feel from behind. “He’s my best friend; does he know that still? He is

doesn't, then he would've hurt me by now." Her urgent calls have now calmed down to a voice that was akin to serene tides at sunset.

However, the graceful moment ended when Bruno suddenly got punted down, almost touching the dirt that the flooring was covering, at least that's how he felt with the impact of the turnaround. Now Aster was pinning him.

"Blossom..." he whispered, though it was a klutzy attempt as his voice was too dry and hoarse to even lower. Still though, Bruno could experience the pang of longing inside of him. "She... You... You won't steal her from me!"

"Steal her?" Bruno spat. "What are you insinuating!?"

Then, all of a sudden, Bruno felt his throat being constricted! Oh dear! It was from Aster's hands gripping it tightly. His every airway is now blocked; nothing was getting out. He attempted to splutter some breaths, but alas, he could only hear himself choking and the wails of Blossom that was merely a muffle now.

Now Bruno could only search for anywhere he could stop him. The sounds of time ticked in his ears, and the beat of his heart was the clock. While he was examining, he could hear the blaring stomps from Alex approaching and Renard trying to intervene. Luckily though, before they could do anything, Bruno managed to find his empty torso. For one last gaze they shared, Bruno took note of the black, beaded eyes and reminded him that what he was going to do was for self-defense, much to his horror.

Bruno flung Aster to the air with the kick of his tough thighs thanks to his taekwondo skills that he learned. As Aster began to fly, Alex and Renard backed away instantly, gasping together.

While Aster was landing though, he was strangely doing so slowly, and while he was feather falling, there was a ghastly figure floating,

exiting from what seemed to be his heart. It was just as black as his eyes and Renard's from before. There was no shape to it though, just a smoky substance levitating, emanating odd energy.

Once Aster plummeted straight to the ground, Blossom crawled to him as fast as she could and whinnied. She held her palm over his cheek. "Aster? Aster? Are you ok?" she kept calling anxiously.

Meanwhile, Renard kept his eye directed at the smoke, like a camera holding a target's sight. Bruno sluggishly got up, almost losing his feet, but held on thanks to Alex's support. The pair stared at the fainted Aster in absolute horror, especially Bruno, knowing that he did this.

Suddenly, Aster opened his eyes, almost too abruptly. He didn't even blink at all or broadened his eyelids. It was just the flicker of a second that it even opened. Nevertheless, Blossom beamed at that heartbeat and was about to tear up in joy.

"Aster!" she choked.

"Bloss…?" he steadily breathed. Once he spotted her face, the face that also enlightened Bruno, he smiled warmly himself. While he didn't look like he had any energy, he kept some for his best friend.

Relieved, the Class 2 pair felt a spice of satisfaction before it was immediately eaten and thrown away when they heard the endless cackling of the smoky figure.

Finally, as they all faced to look at the figure, they realized that it was the physical manifestation of no one other than the possessor himself: Utter Darkness. His cruel laughter was translated from before, still as raw and rough. Although, Renard appeared to have already puzzled it out since he had the expression of pure iron will instilled in him.

Utter Darkness, while he didn't form any expression on his face, clearly was feeling quite dazed, but also ready and feverishly mischievous.

"OH, YOU INSOLENT CHILDREN. DO YOU REALLY THINK YOU CAN SERVE ME BY JUST BEATING EACH OTHER AND WHINING ABOUT YOUR TEENAGE HIGH SCHOOL DRAMA?" jeered Utter Darkness. "NOW THAT'S JUST A FOOL'S ERRAND. MOTHER HAD TAUGHT ME EVEN BETTER AND SHE BANISHED ME!" Then Aster shook suddenly, zapped by an exposed wire out in the streets. "I THOUGHT YOUR PARENTS TAUGHT YOU WELL, ASTER, ALTHOUGH YOU ARE THE ONE TO REJECT THEM TOO... AND REJECT ME IN TURN."

"I'm *not* serving you! I *never* will!" spat Aster boldly.

Utter Darkness's ghastly figure rounded on Aster, circling around him until a certain stop. "YOU'LL REGRET SAYING THAT." Soon, he trembled and froze. A deep breath comes. "AND I WON'T BE NEEDING YOU ANYWAYS."

"You need me!" Renard called, although nobody could tell if it worked since, well, Utter Darkness was just smoke, it couldn't turn to face anyone. But it was obvious that it didn't after it advanced towards Bruno, charging at him.

Miraculously, Blossom leaped to the side. She had grabbed the Dusk and Dawn book and, as she launched herself, she fanned the spirit away with the gust it formed. Utter Darkness was now bashed to the wall. A groan came after.

"FINE. IF YOU WANT TO BE SO DIFFICULT..."

The detectives all gulped while Renard readied himself.

Utter Darkness now took his every chance to infect any of the four, avoiding Renard the best he could. Aster dodged a flicker from him, Alex also did some acrobatics to jump over him. Blossom continued to try to use the ability of the wind to her advantage, pretending like the book was just any old paper fan.

“Try to stay together!” Renard ordered.

That caused Bruno to instantly glue himself to Blossom. The sudden hug made the girl blush, but her boy was a bit too grounded to the moment. He leered deeply at the spirit before he and his lover ducked as the smoke tried to fling himself towards the young man.

There was more rapid motion from the spirit, but it was combated by the even more nimble movement of the youthful teens. They had the agility of fighter planes and the tenacity of athletes.

Sadly, the efforts were fruitless once Utter Darkness struck one of them. No… It was Bruno!

Blossom, who was beside him, now had to back away. Her wails and moans got stronger as she got to Aster’s arms. Alex also regrouped close to them and Renard just stood at the corner, shaken further than he already was.

Bruno, meanwhile, was shivering, trembling as his senses have gone cold and unresponsive. Then, with a sharp heartbeat, he felt his every flesh and bone torn apart. But the throbbing pain wasn’t as bad as when he had every memory, every scene, every thought he ever had flash through his brain like a sickening slideshow. And they weren’t any memory, scene or thought, they were his most negative ones. The ones that always give him a huge pang.

Lightning had finally struck him and darkness invaded him fully. He felt his breath was being absorbed by a spirit from the Underworld, but no… it couldn’t be… He was being fused with Utter Darkness!

His veins turned black slowly but steadily while he closed his eyes, reliving everything. His breakup with Claire and his old friends, how he spread the rumors about Dexter, his bullies in middle school, being worried about his father's dangerous duties as an officer of the law. What made him shiver the most were the whispers that kept echoing and ringing in his ears that just won't go away.

"*You're not good enough.*"

"*Nobody loves you, not even Blossom.*"

"*You deserve to be mocked.*"

"*You're just ordinary old Bruno. You're* nothing."

He began to repeat the last two words to himself… "*I'm nothing.*" It was a chant he never imagined would keep repeating in real time.

Bruno went on to rub his shoulders to calm himself down, but that did nothing other than to make his companions and Renard more uneasy. That's when he pondered if this is what Aster went through… If he did… then what did he think?

There was no more time to wonder though. He was finally controlled… for good… Bruno opened his eyes, now filled with ink and replaced with his cruelest self.

"Bruno!" everyone exclaimed in unison.

"ASTER'S BODY WAS BETTER, BUT WHATEVER..." scoffed Bruno as he tossed his baseball cap, Alex catching it shakily, though he was about to drop it too. However, he breathed in again, being the largest inhale then exhale he ever experienced, just to become partially himself again… But now worse by a tenfold…

His brain was darkened, corrupted, with his violent thoughts. Now it was time to act on them.

Bruno arched around the cuddled-up group, whose eyes were shrunken and they were cowering, their huddled space adding up their every nerve vibration.

"I've been waiting for this for three weeks," he smiled malevolently, dipping his head in excitement. He took pleasure and absorbed the fear that came out of his former companions. It was certainly something he wished they could feel about him all the time.

The other three now felt like they were trapped in a zoo where they were cornered by a vicious crocodile, itching to bite into them. Even Aster crouched down. "This isn't you, Bruno!" Alex called.

"It is me," Bruno rasped.

"Oh, it has to be! You've wanted to kill us after all this time, huh? Is this all because of some stupid, petty, idiotic pranks and teasing? Is that it?!" Aster snarled harshly, his voice becoming a fork scraping against a chalkboard for Bruno, every word vomited from him too.

"It's more than pranks and teasing. I've had enough... OF EVERYTHING!" he screamed. "But yes. Everything started with you. So it's time to say your last words!" His smirk was deadly… and twitchy…

Finally, after lending himself energy even though he already lost some from Utter Darkness, he flashed to Aster, pulled him, and headbutt him to the point where he fell, hitting the music box. It began to play hectic, chaotic music that were mostly made up of pianos but also some drums and guitars mixed in.

That was when Alex and Blossom got to their feet and started to pull punches at the newcomer despite their initial reluctancy.

Bruno dodged a couple, though got hit massively by the girl. However, he retaliated by biting her like Aster did to him. After a flinch from her, Alex shook him to maybe get him to snap back, but Bruno only

kicked him from the shin. The genius nearly tripped before gripping himself back and punching him by the jaw.

Bruno started to feel… a nosebleed. But when he noticed the blood, it was black, just like ink.

But that slight moment of vulnerability gave way to a hit, and Bruno predicted right. Sadly, he didn't have the reaction time to even dodge a hard punch back in the head by Aster!

Bruno fell flat to the floor, now only seeing black. Once he could see again though, he turned away from the light wooden ground to glare searingly at the group, who crowded up again. Aster leered back but Alex appeared apprehensive while Blossom was on the crunch of tears. When Bruno noticed the last of the three, his muscles relaxed for a heartbeat. He felt like himself again…

Sadly, that was swiped away by Utter Darkness who placed lumpen dumbbells and a mountain on him as he flattened himself back. A groan was even vocalized out.

"Utter Darkness... all they did to me is torture me... Play with my heart... I ask to be their friend, and two took their time! I love Blossom, yes... and Alex, I appreciate him... but... what is it worth if they didn't like me in the first place?" Bruno muttered under his breath to Utter Darkness. His eyes flickered in fear and confusion, the eyes that he didn't show to the others. While he was talking to the demon, really, he just wanted to puke everything out to himself, and sort of wanted the group to hear him out.

And, much to his pleasure, as he turned only his head around to view them, he found the mellow expression of Blossom that was the sun while Alex finally had a flash of sympathy at some point, even with how his body started to constrict itself.

"They don't... It... it doesn't matter... does it?" More questions kept being mumbled to himself, but he didn't want to make it out even to himself. Nothing had to make sense for himself. "It... does... Aster hates me... He was about to kill me!"

"Bruno—"

Aster was abruptly cut off by Renard who lifted Bruno by the neck slightly then immediately slammed him to the ground, actually causing a subtle crack in the floor in the process.

"OH MY GOD, BRUNO!" shrieked the three.

Renard chuckled though, almost as if he didn't just injure someone and instead, was caught flying paper airplanes! "Oh, don't worry!" he chortled. "Bruno is durable because of the corruption. Also, I want to rid him of it." Weirdly enough, Bruno himself could hear the conversation because his conscious was… partially there… and he didn't even feel any sort of agony anymore.

"How?" spluttered Alex after.

While the next words were fairly muffled for Bruno, he could make out the most vital parts. "Dizziness and sudden motion can snap someone out of corruption. I learned that from the week I spent hiding here," explained Renard. "I caused Bruno a bit of motion sickness, so yeah, he's probably still here, listening to us."

Finally, Bruno heaved his head just an inch and made out a thumbs up. When he opened his eyes, he could only see blurry colors.

"Then where's Utter Darkness?" Blossom wailed.

As she said that, the devil himself emerged from the back of Bruno, being the same smoky trail that it was before reforming into the puff. "YOU'RE SMART," Utter Darkness hissed.

At once, Renard leaped at the cloud. Bruno peered up, noticing the scene. Renard held the mist as close and as tightly as he could, then gripped it to his heart to the point where it finally infected him. The dying screams of the demon could be heard, wallowing and weeping like a banshee before it finally ended. "RENARD, YOU WILL ONLY REGRET THIS!" he blathered out as his last words. Only traces remained in the memories of the young adults around. The thin air dissipated, causing the formerly missing boy to descend since there was nothing levitating him anymore.

As soon as he landed, Bruno propped himself the best he could. Blossom helped him and so did Alex eventually, both supporting two of his respective shoulders. Meanwhile, the blue teen himself could still only see nothing but a static vision of colors and his feet barely bolstered him. He kept swaying clumsily.

"Bruno, are you ok?" Blossom asked.

Once their eyes met, Bruno's vision cleared up again and his feet weren't feeble glass anymore. It was as if the sight of the girl was enough to cure him, which made his heart spawn butterflies like previous times.

"Yes. I'm fine," he assured with a wistful smile.

Aster scurried to Renard. "Where were you when Bruno was going cuckoo?" he snorted. When the shapeshifter turned to the foreigner though, he wore a silly grin and said, "I was figuring things out."

"What do you mean…" groaned Aster further.

"You didn't have to hit me so hard too… I could've had a concussion," Bruno added, copying the groaning.

"Well, I figured out how to control the corruption sometime before you came in, but not fully. I only did when you guys got infected though," Renard went on.

Now the four exchanged nervous glances. “You’re… going to live with corruption now?” Blossom questioned.

Renard sighed, moments of grief showing itself now. Those had to be what he went through during the investigation. “Yes. I need to protect everyone from it, and I’m fine with being a victim now. Like I said: I managed to control it in my own way, and nobody can get infected as long as I can bear with it,” he answered.

While everyone appeared to be sorrowful at first, Alex was the first to smile admirably. He dipped his head in the same spirit, bowing down to his own subject. “That is very noble of you, Renard. You’re sacrificing your own sanity for the sake of ours,” he stated.

“Thank you, King Alex,” Renard warmly replied. Then he exploded as he realized something. “Of course!” he exclaimed loudly. His feet scattered around before he could properly articulate himself. “I’m the one who has to thank you. You all found me when nobody else could. I can’t even believe it myself!”

“You should,” smirked Aster smugly. “We *are* the ones to have found the Lanes!”

Renard chuckled. “That’s true,” he added haphazardly.

After marinating on the moment and Bruno thought about what he just went through, he noticed Alex facing the door, then straight at the others, opening his mouth and breathing before speaking. “We must go now. We’ve already skipped so many classes!”

“Like that’s a problem,” scorned Aster.

“That *is* a problem, Mr. Jonquil!” yelled Alex.

That’s when they begin to bicker once more! Renard sweated, drenched in embarrassment. Even his corruption couldn’t be triggered now! Instead, it could only be his shapeshifting abilities that he inherently has.

Renard transfigured only face into Aster and pretended to mumble, his every strand of hair fizzled out. That fact made Bruno laugh hysterically while Blossom just smiled, trying not to make her sense of humor overt to her might-be offended friend.

Bruno began to pick up his bag and baseball cap, shut down the music box but when he looked at the copy of Dusk and Dawn, a looming feeling dreaded him. Thankfully, Renard came to his side and stared at it too, blankly and dryly. “The book that caused it all… I bet Utter Darkness intentionally corrupted it so it could spread…” A hoarse sigh came after. “That shouldn’t matter now. Let’s leave it behind.”

“That’s right!” The voice of Blossom trailed behind.

When Bruno turned around, he noticed the other three already out of the room. He smiled, gave Renard a glance, then ran to them. Soon enough, his classmate followed after hiding the book under the rocking horse toy. Ominously a symbol of what just happened, a memory that will hopefully fade away just like the book itself does…

As Renard padded towards the other teens, he asked after thoroughly thinking. “How did you track me anyways?”

“Alex and I made a deal…” moaned Aster.

“Well, that and it was mostly Class 2 coming up with ideas… Though actually it might be just me and Bruno,” Alex added, sounding winded by the end. He caught his breath again. “Mandy took us to inside the walls of the school, the next day, the four of us found writing from Pips—”

“Pips?” wallowed Renard. “Oh god. Utter Darkness told me about him. I thought he was joshing!”

“Really?!” yelped Bruno while the others whooped in disbelief.

“Yeah. He said that he got his hands on that egomaniacal freak everyone knew ages ago. Why did he write that message though… I don’t

know…" Renard sighed, seemingly resigning himself. "I guess he wanted to scare more people though in case someone does find it."

Blossom chortled, almost snorting. "He was kind of effective."

"Anyways," the leader went on, "Bruno and I kept trying to make up leads. Pips being the one behind it, then Vice Principal Lam—You'll meet him, Renard—and finally he found the book that answered it all."

"There was also Stemlung bile," Bruno added in a whisper.

The shapeshifter's attention was caught as he briefly froze before sprinting himself again. He seemingly caught his brakes for a split second, possibly because he almost caught up with his lost thoughts. "That makes sense. Stemlung bile can detect any nearby corruption, soulsider spirits too, but I mostly see it used for corruption by sleuths."

While the others had a sense of clarity, Bruno's heart dropped. What Renard said… that must confirm that McRyan did know what was going on after all! But he wondered if he should say anything or just keep quiet. Enough drama was already going on, he had guessed that more would happen if he admitted that McRyan might have some knowledge of Renard's pain.

So… he kept his stillness, biting his tongue.

"That's all, right?" Renard prompted, causing them all to nod together. "Good! I've been caught up enough today—"

Suddenly, Renard bumped into someone as soon as the gang had all taken the turn to the exit (or entrance) of the kindergarten zone. He was almost delirious, though he shook his head before any more dizziness could faint him. He heard the collective gasps of the other teens.

When he rose his head, he also had a squeaky gulp.

There was a lanky man towering over Renard. He had messy black hair and kind eyes, bright skin though not as pale as the boy's new one. Bruno knew exactly who he was though.

"There you are, children!" the man cried first.

"Vice Principal Lam!" the four teens exclaimed.

Renard hollered, swinging his head around. "You're the new vice principal?" he questioned, bumfuzzled. "But you're so… poofy!"

Lam blushed and chuckled softly, his cheeks puffing as a result. "Really? I've never heard someone call me poofy before," he murmured. Suddenly, he widened his eyes into the size of a basketball. "Oh! You must be Renard!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, he is!" Blossom grinned.

Aster wore that same smug smile as before, though it still didn't rub on Bruno as much as it usually does. "We found him together."

"What happened to you?" Lam enquired, almost on the brink of bellowing in angst. "You seem… paler than a normal child your age. Although I suppose you haven't seen the sun much since you disappeared?"

The question made Renard shiver, not in the words itself, but in the actual answer itself that made him cower. "I was corrupted," he answered.

That made Lam squawk greatly, jerking, nearly losing his balance just at the thought of that. "Oh dear! Should… should I—"

"Don't worry, vice principal. I'm in control of it," Renard interjected, almost woefully.

The vice principal gave the other students a reluctant glance though. What was he reluctant of? Well, Bruno assumed that he didn't want to believe Renard. He wouldn't blame him. Renard appeared to be very, very sickly, and he was for a week and with a famously terminal disease at that if left untreated. It was Lam's duty to care too much about the boy. At

least Bruno felt more comforted knowing that perhaps Lam isn't going to be that bad. Not all Darkeners have to be bad. Renard could've been one because of his corruption for all he knew, and Lam was just a former Darkener. Who knows?

Either way, Lam beckoned the kids further. "Alright, well, let's go. The principal asked me to find you and escort you back to class. It's already the middle of the day, you know?"

Alex's nerves all were tingled at this point while Aster snickered harshly, trying his best to not burst into laughter.

"Are you children okay…?" Lam asked slowly.

"They are fine," assured Bruno robotically.

Lam blinked, then shrugged and head on forward. Blossom gave Aster a good ear pull while the ordinary boy sighed deeply and followed the vice principal with Renard. This made the others scamper ahead.

Finally though, the case was over. All was well. Renard might still be corrupted, but at least he is at peace with it, he knows what to do with it, and he is determined to keep everyone safe. Now what enlightened Bruno are the thoughts about everyone's reactions upon seeing their classmate again, and most of all, his family who were strangled by the temporary loss of their child.

It all relieved Bruno and when he glanced at his classmate, he could see that same spark he had always seen in that monotone-dressed, yet energetic boy.

His foretelling is all confirmed as soon as Lam and the teenagers reach Class 2. Aster and Blossom had both separated into their respective classes. While Bruno knew they'd face some form of animosity, he knew he and Alex wouldn't. Not at all.

It was the moment of truth as they slid the door open…

“That is how—”

Mr. Mutton was interrupted immediately by being frozen at the sight of Bruno, Alex and… of course: Renard! He gasped at the same time as all the other twenty students in the room.

“RENARD!” everyone cheered, tears even spilled out of some of the members, including Mutton!

“YOU’RE ALIVE!” Max called.

There were then howls of jubilation. The vivacious crowd made Bruno feel like he had just won a huge sport title for his country, but no, he found a classmate. While he only knew the boy for a day, everyone else there knew him for the good of a decade, even if he was in a different class for half of it.

“Hey, hey! I miss you too!” chuckled Renard. However, his mischievous exterior turned bittersweet as he was on the brink of tears. This was more apparent when he turned to face Bruno as he was completely pink-cheeked. “Mother… Is this how heaven feels like?” Bruno giggled mildly along.

“How are you?”

“What happened?”

Now questions began to cascade throughout the class. Renard had turned into a celebrity that came back from a hiatus!

“One word: Corruption,” he soon answered nonchalantly. It made everyone gasp though, but then he proceeded to add with assurance. “Don’t worry! I’m fine. I’ve controlled it.”

Yet again, everyone sighed of relief, then exploded again in joy and bliss! Celebrations all around! Bruno and Alex couldn’t help but laugh along too, and even Lam, though he was already glistening in the moment!

Everything really was well, finally…

Chapter 24

The Aftermath

The next day rolled around, it was a rock down a steep mountain for how fast it went. This was probably because now the burden of solving the mystery was lifted, or the burden of solving *anything* at all really was gone for Bruno. Finally, he could feel that same serene nature that his mundane life always held for him.

This was exemplified when Bruno was on his first bus ride to school without anything hanging over his head, except for the day he returned, of course. He could see Blossom like normal now and they could chat, albeit both still having lingering thoughts about Alex and Aster. Nonetheless, they had enough other, and to Bruno at least, that was what mattered.

And once they step foot into the school, everything was nothing to him now. The ground wasn't quaking anymore, no more was his brain trembling thinking about whether or not Renard or Terrance were around. No, none of that existed anymore.

Looking at Blossom only lifted his mood to a higher degree. He could tell he did the same to the girl.

What lightened him up further was the sudden pull of his backpack from a light force. When he spun around, he found two little girls who were about 6 and 8 years old, both equally as adorable as the other. He grinned greatly, though awkwardly too. Blossom, meanwhile, was just giggling and was in awe of the girls. Then the two cracked when Renard and two adults came in.

"Hey guys!" Renard greeted. "Where are Alex and Aster?"

"They're probably here already," Blossom answered.

“Ah, too bad. I wish they could be here so that my family can talk to all of you!” Renard beamed. “Isn’t that right?”

He made way for supposedly his parents to came. Actually, Bruno did finally ground himself once he examined their appearance clearly. They were indeed familiar, the same people who were at the principal’s office a week ago… It was them!

“Yes, that’s right!” Artemis smiled, being the taller of the two parents, a trait carried over to his son. “Thank you very much for finding our son. We owe you so much.”

“We really thought he was dead…” Josette added, relief washing over her as if she had only realized it now that her son is here.

“Renard wasn’t lying before for you… Bruno, right?” Artemis prompted, causing Bruno to nod joyfully. “He said that you caught Terrance, and with this lovely lady too, I presume. That’s very brave of you! I was wrong to doubt Principal Dunkel.”

His wife then leaned on to whisper, “I told you,” which immediately shattered Artemis’s soul!

While the parents exchanged glares, Renard pushed the young girls slightly forward to face his two peers. “Say thank you to your brother’s friends too!”

“Thank you!” the girls shone their eyes as they said. Blossom was about to explode in their cuteness! “Oh my god! What are their names!?” she energetically enquired.

“Gabrielle, from Grade 1, and Catherine, from Grade 3,” Renard replied calmly.

“Well, you’re welcome, guys! It’s our pleasure!” Bruno said as he waved to the whole family. While they didn’t verbally respond, they did wave back as he and Blossom returned to the campus, ignoring how Renard too had to separate from them.

The two proceeded onward upstairs, ascending, trying to ignore all the smiles glimmering, beaming towards the pair over their achievement. This never happened before, though everyone was out of school when he found Terrance, so it wasn't necessarily like this wouldn't have happened.

Once they reach their floor, they spotted the usual lively, spry corridor, filled with students chattering about gossip, unfinished homework and other shenanigans. Blossom turned to find Team Toxic, seemingly searching for something behind the school curtains. When Bruno noticed, he scoffed at it while the girl tried to hold back her laughter.

Aster suddenly appeared, his eyes intensely burning unlike how he normally does. "Good morning!" he greeted.

"Hey, Asty! What got you so liven up?" Blossom asked.

"I just got to the climax of Dusk and Dawn, but I got cut off last night… Now I'm more than excited to read it again! Although I'd rather relish in my fame too," Aster smiled.

Bruno rolled his eyes while trying not to form one smile himself.

"By the way, Bruno, something happened yesterday in my class that might affect yours."

The news instantly snapped Bruno from being jolly to anguished. "WHAT? WHAT DO YOU MEAN?" he screamed, then immediately lowering his tone in embarrassment, also trying not to shake Aster by the shoulders at the same time.

"Well… You see… one of my classmates decided that enough was enough. Yesterday, my classmates kind of fought about Renard being in your class and thought that he should belong to us now," Aster said.

"What? That's crazy!" hissed Bruno.

“I know, right?” shrieked Aster, his eyes almost popping out. “Anyways, Michael decided to kick one of the guys who said Renard should be in our class… actually, he is one of the three loud majority.”

“Who?” Bruno muttered. Even Blossom was on the edge of her metaphorical seat.

“Paul Miller,” Aster whispered.

Bruno hadn’t heard of that name before, although neither did he for countless other students. Nonetheless, he could tell that Paul was already a fanatical kind, just like Pips when he rejected the idea that Alex doesn’t care about Renard’s loyalty.

“I’ll keep him in mind in case Alex asks any questions. Thanks for telling me,” Bruno responded. Then he snapped once again. “Wait, why are you suddenly being nice to me?”

“Oh, Alex is still forcing the deal onto me until the end of the week…” That statement was followed by a deafening groan of despair. Thankfully, Blossom patted him on the back haphazardly. “Oh, it’s fine! It’s Thursday, you’ve only got tomorrow!”

Bruno, not wanting to be around the soured mood bully, was about to frantically walk away until he was suddenly pulled by the harsh force of someone. When he twisted his head around, he found… Blossom? She teleported away from Aster just to be close to him.

“Bruno, before you go…” she started softly. Her words were about to be eaten before she chewed it up and spit it out. “I just want to do something I’ve been wanting to do ever since you confessed…”

That made the newcomer shiver… the implications are all over the place, unless his conclusion was right. Suddenly, and very much so, Blossom drew him sharply towards her. Chest to chest, heart to heart, nose to nose, their heads aligned in a complete, straight line. There was no

mistaking what she was about to do, but Bruno didn't want to reject it either…

Blossom lunged her lips into his, kissing him!

Bruno felt a large shock scanning through his every organ until he came to normal and reality as he found her eyes. He blushed greatly before, and now he embraced it as he returned it back.

Then the pair stepped apart, their gazes continuing to be fixed on each other. Brown to rose-tinted. There was a glimmer in the girl's eyes that Bruno couldn't help but fly because of it. His spirit was now fully engulfed in the emotion that is… Love!

But amidst the barrage of emotions, Bruno noticed Aster's livid expression in the background. He was completely petrified, his jaws completely meeting the ground. His spiky hair not covering him anymore, and neither did his leather jacket. His eyes were even shrunk. Mild shudders could be heard too despite the murmurs of the passing crowds.

That caused not only Bruno to ground himself, but also Blossom, although she really just let go of the lingering love surrounding her. "Well, got to go now. Your class needs you and my team needs me," she declared. "I'll… see you," she later smiled.

Bruno grinned back as the girl bound up to the frozen, almost grief-stricken Aster. While he couldn't make out the words, he could hear Blossom frantically asking him "What's wrong?" or "What's the matter?" which was of no use. When Bruno and his bully's eyes meet finally, the newcomer could sense a bit of vengeance and hate beginning to boil inside, scalding him like never before. Darkness drowned him.

Terrified, Bruno scattered away, retreating to his classroom.

It didn't seem like things were better. Actually, it was more chaotic by a tenfold! As soon as he entered, it was a contrast to how it was the last time

he entered a joyous boy. There were arguments galore, all circling around one person, or rather, all surrounding that one person.

The person in question was a boy the same skin as, although a tone darker than, Maverick. His hair was too the same, just more rugged and like a bob-cut with more scruffs and fluffs. He wore the jacket of a similar color to Renard, but also a granite-colored bandana on top.

"That is absolute nonsense!"

That voice belonged to Alex! Bruno almost skidded to a halt as he approached him. "Alex, it's about Paul, isn't it?"

"What—How did you know?" spluttered the leader, trying to whisper as faintly as he could.

"Aster told me," Bruno answered, somehow whispering even quieter. That got Alex to flinch slightly.

"Paul, just understand that I don't belong in Class 4 anymore," Renard told him calmly. It was then that Bruno realized that his squeaky voice was magically gone. Perhaps corruption took it away.

"You do! You only got into danger because you switched classes!" Paul snarled.

"Well, guess what? You swapped classes here too! Is that so bad?" Sheldon instantly snapped back.

"It is because you're all ganging up on me. Is this what Bruno went through too?" Paul sneered. "Yeesh, no wonder why he seems a little tense in this school."

The mere mention of his name caused Bruno to get into a riot and rumble. He stomped forward to face his supposed newest classmate, toe-to-toe. "I'm not tense because of this class, I'm tense because of the literal kidnapping and missing incidents."

"Gee, alright. I can't believe Michael defends you guys…" Paul groans, disappointment, although in a wrong place, puked out.

Finally though, the last verdict, the last stand, was from Alex as he firmly and solidly stood his foot in the middle of the class, showing it from a line his subjects carved. “Paul. You stay in this class, and you’re going to like it. If your own leader doesn’t want you in Class 4, then you yourself don’t belong there either, but I’d like you here.”

“Why?” Bruno rushed to him, whispering still.

Alex replied, not only to Bruno, but now answering the unsaid question that flooded the minds of his fellows. “Paul is a strong student. You’re unquestionably loyal to your former class, Paul, but they don’t need it anymore. We need you instead. If you show your loyalty, I’ll keep you here.” Abruptly though, he interrupted his calm speech by turning it into a searing threat. “But if you don’t, then find your chances with Class 1 and 3.”

Paul began to hesitate; his mind seemingly changed as his eyes started to dart around aimlessly to every scowling classmate. Everyone wasn’t even smiling one bit, not even Connor, Casper or Violet, the usually milder students. Bruno couldn’t help but feel an ounce of sympathy. Paul did just get kicked out because he fought against his leader, while for a silly reason, it was for a reason, nonetheless. Now he is facing the same animosity some of his classmates showed him, though now Bruno assumed this was worse.

“So? What’s your verdict?” Alex asked sharply, standing firm.

After one more glance around the room, Paul dipped his head, then heaved it as he smiled greatly. “Fine. I will,” he declared.

There were more bewildered gasps than cheers. Actually, they weren’t any at all, although Renard was more satisfied than upset. “It will be fine, Paul. You know me well, and Craig. I’ll guide you,” Renard assured.

Paul glared at Alex and Bruno though, then scoffed. He set off to an extra seat that Bruno just noticed now, way in the back, behind Casper and Connor who were to the left-hand side of the room. All the students separated to make room for him. After they exchanged one more leer-off against each other, Paul moaned to look down and everyone else dispersed to their seats.

Murmurs were had across the room, ringing over Bruno's head. It irked him more than anything. He stared at Alex, longing for some answers about the adaptation.

Alex, though, grinned at him. "He will be alright. Every new student is like this… Weren't you?"

"Yeah, well, I didn't have to deal with getting rounded on by everyone in this class," Bruno snarked.

"I get it," Alex sighed. "Paul will soften up though. I think you can help that. I think you've softened me enough already."

Bruno smiled like the sun was just below him. Even Alex returned that same upside down frown that he doesn't usually wear.

After a glance at Paul, Bruno turned back to face the whiteboard and sighed longingly. A sudden call came to him though. He pulled his scarlet backpack and withdrew, of course, his dusty old book. "Insulso," he muttered under his breath.

He opened it to write down how he felt… How his heart fluttered moments ago and how he just found a student who could've been as good as dead. Now he pondered though… What comes next?

Class 2 Fun Facts!

Class 2 is a class full of extraordinary teenagers! Do you know any of these silly facts about them?

- Bruno originally had a bad habit of being a liar earlier on in the development of the books.
- Alex is one of the few students who consistently pulled off an A+ at least in one subject every year.
- At some point during development, Carly was once Craig's girlfriend. This was intended to happen during the events of Book 3.
- Sarah once had big teeth as one of her major descriptors.
- Craig once had a crush on a cartoon character named Yuzuki who Riley introduced him to.
- Sid is only drowsy and lazy because he's a night owl and is genuinely productive at night.
- Maverick is the fastest student of the whole year, running at 16 mph at his most.
- Mandy, as a ghost, can possess other people just like other hidden ghosts roaming the world. However, she never does so out of morality.
- Bruno's childhood admirer, Nadia, has only had a crush on him purely due to his voice.
- Despite being a colorful character, Isabella's favorite color is beige!
- During production, Max had a rival named MAX-0 who is a prototype version of him. It got scrapped once the finale, that was

once about him, changed to the current book finale. However, MAX-0 does still exist in the form of Zero in a supplemental book.

- Renard has Greek and French blood. His father is Greek while his mother is French.
- Spencer's favorite genre of music is classical, and he likes playing it during his daily workouts.
- Sheldon was supposed to move to Hungary with his family before the flight got cancelled. After the flight's cancellation, the family decided to just stay in New York. This happened around fourth grade.
- Riley is so strong, he can climb to the roof of the school. He nearly did that in the sixth grade before Mabel Deanscrabble, the grumpy lunchlady, caught and stopped him.
- In original versions of the books, Violet was supposed to be one of the Brooklyn kids who moved in.
- Roselynn has enhanced smell. This runs in her family, which is how they managed to run an incense company.
- Winnie is known to have an affinity for any kind of feline, but her favorite are always the strange hairless cats.
- Before he got into singing and music, Connor was into horse riding and had ambitions of becoming one at some point in time. This is because his uncle is a horse rider.
- Originally, Casper was supposed to be killed off at some point of the books, around the last book.

Soon enough, after staring enough at Alex, Bruno resigned himself to his seat, now staring at the tables that bend at his right arm. For some reason he can't explain, he started shivering. His thoughts scrambled about his leader, his new friend that he was supposed to make. It's all numb. All static. All nothing. It was just scribbles manifested into his brain. His blank gaze at his table said it all, drying up his eyes.

A young boy named Bruno attempts to navigate through high school while solving mysteries revolving around his school—and perhaps all of New York City. On his way, he finds out a dark secret about himself.

Bruno once again finds himself caught up in another mystery, but this time it gets much more personal: His classmate, Renard Fox, has gone missing! Now it's up to the efforts of him, his partner and reluctant troublemakers to find him as everyone else had ended up with dead leads. Will this even be possible or will they end up in danger?

Written by: Jasmine